

# The Longest Line

An inquiry into what happened  
on election day, 2004, in Gambier, Ohio

Produced by the Sunset Prose Collective

## Introduction

When the BBC began to broadcast the news from London we knew it must really be news: on election day 2004, our little town, Gambier, Ohio, the home of Kenyon College, had the longest voting line in the United States.

The polls across Ohio had opened at 6:30 a.m. on November 2nd; most closed on schedule at 7:30 that evening, but in Gambier the last voter did not cast the last ballot until 3:56 a.m., November 3rd. Strangely, to those who stood in line, the Knox County Board of Elections had provided two voting machines to serve the precinct's 1,300 registered voters, 85% of whom had showed up at the polls. This pair of machines was able to accommodate about 45 voters per hour and, as the day wore on, the line just got longer and longer. Citizens who arrived at 7:30 in the morning waited for an hour and a half; by the end of the day the wait had grown to eleven hours. Worse, there were many who never got to vote at all, who waited in line for six or seven hours only to be called away by obligations to work or family.

What happened? Was this a conspiracy of some sort? Was it simple incompetence on the part of the local Board of Elections? Or was this a "perfect storm," a disaster arising from circum-stances that hardworking and well-intentioned people could not have foreseen or controlled?

At the time of the election I was leading a writing workshop in "creative nonfiction prose." I had set the class up to write about nature, and since August we had been going out into the woods and fields around Gambier and trying to reflect our experiences in prose. The first time the class met after the election, however, we found ourselves captured by the story of "the line." It seemed one of those moments in which the "course of study" might rightly be allowed to leave its prescribed path. And so we gave ourselves an assignment: to produce a clear and evenhanded account of what forces had come together to produce the longest line.

We began by making a list of people to interview. It seemed that the Board of Elections should be the focus of our inquiry, but that it might be best to know as much as we could about what happened before we spoke to them. The class thus began by splitting into small teams and interviewing ten people who had been close to the election in one way or another--the mayor of the town, the presiding judge at our precinct, a student who had been active registering Kenyon students to vote, and so forth. Once we had a sense of how people close to the election saw what had happened, we went and talked to the staff of the Knox County Board of Elections.

What follows here are accounts of these interviews, beginning with individuals and ending with the Board. We discussed adding an editorial comment at the end--how, having done this work, do we see the story of what happened?--but we decided against it. Our self-assignment had been to get the story, not to comment on it. While we tried to pose hard questions where they needed to be asked we have also tried to let those who were involved reply on their own terms, and speak for themselves.

-- Lewis Hyde

### **Ellery Biddle**

The Kenyon College Bookstore was packed on the day before Thanksgiving break. Students flipped through magazines from the racks, played checkers, answered their cell phones..., killing time before the last shuttle left for the Columbus airport. What seemed the literal center of the College was the perfect place to speak with Ellery Biddle, the Kenyon College senior whose efforts to mobilize eligible voters at Kenyon had helped lead to a staggering increase in voter turnout in Gambier, Ohio.

Ms. Biddle feels passionately about the right to vote. For her, college is a place where students should learn to vote. She stated that college campuses are unique because students are always encouraged to have open discussion and debate, and therefore, the campus is the easiest place to hear different points of view about issues ranging from the presidential election to the possible changes on the school board. Much of Kenyon's student body agreed with her, and by Election Day, about 525 of Kenyon's 1,550 students had registered to vote in Gambier.

Last August, in hopes of such increased registration, Ms. Biddle had called the Knox County Board of Elections, asking for a new polling place to be established in Peirce Hall, a central campus building. The Board, she says, denied her request with a "complicated excuse" about the transient population of a college campus; since the turnout might not stay as high as it was for a presidential election, the Board did not feel it was necessary to establish the extra polling place.

Although many Kenyon students registered locally, even Ms. Biddle did not expect the large turnout on Election Day. She arrived at the Gambier Community Center at 7:00 a.m., and there was already a long line. She returned in the early afternoon with a friend, Shannon Donald, bringing fruit to students waiting in line. Ms. Biddle did not leave the polling place until 2:30 on the morning of November 3, when the police made everyone who was not waiting to vote leave for security reasons.

While she was there, Ms. Biddle noticed that many Kenyon students refused to take the paper ballots that had been provided under a court order around 9:00 p.m. Students feared that the paper ballots would be considered "provisional" and not counted until 12 days after the election ended, which was not the case. Ms. Biddle does not blame the students for not knowing how the paper ballots would actually be handled and, in fact, she could not stop congratulating the Kenyon student body on their perseverance and on their high spirits during the long wait.

Her experience of Election Day was not perfect, however. One of the upsetting moments of the day came when she spoke to Mayor Kirk Emmert late that night. He told her: "I wish they would use the paper ballots so I could go home." Ms. Biddle was disappointed by Mayor Emmert; while acknowledging that he was not responsible for the voting fiasco, she felt he could have done more to alleviate the stress of the day.

Ms. Biddle speculates that the reason Gambier did not have enough voting machines were issues of state or local funding. Ms. Biddle does not excuse the problems that arose on Election Day. She took it as a cautionary tale and now believes that this fiasco will raise awareness about flaws in the election system. She referred to the ability not only to vote, but to vote conveniently, as "our first priority in calling ourselves a democracy."

## **Joan Slonczewski**

As the sun peeked above the horizon on the morning of November 2nd, long before the polls were open, Joan Slonczewski was in her home anxiously flipping

through the radio news channels. The Democratic Party had chosen Slonczewski, a Kenyon College biology professor, to be its representative in the polling station of Gambier, Ohio under the official title of “challenger.” Ohio election law allows each party to have a representative in a precinct as an observer, with the right to question somebody’s right to vote. A challenger could, for example, question someone who seemed too young to vote, or who seemed to be in the wrong precinct. Slonczewski had been sworn in some weeks ago by the local Board of Elections and was planning to join the election workers when the polls opened.

There was, however, a law suit making its way through the courts that might upset her plans. The Democratic Party in Ohio had been registering tens of thousands of new voters during the fall campaign and the Republicans, expressing concern about voter fraud, had countered by enlisting scores of challengers to monitor the polls. Democrats, afraid that the Republicans were out to intimidate voters or to slow things down in Democratic precincts, had filed suit to bar all challengers. The suit was as yet unsettled when Slonczewski went to bed on election eve.

The Democratic Party had its challengers too, of course, but rather than question voter eligibility, the Democrats were given the task of insuring voter rights. They received cards to wear around their necks that listed Ohio’s Voter’s Bill of Rights. Slonczewski was one of more than thirty Democratic challengers in Knox County. County Republicans had turned out only five, one of whom was assigned to Gambier; College Township (a small precinct using the same polling place as Gambier) had no Republican challenger at all. Slonczewski took this as evidence of Republicans only wanting to monitor predominantly democratic precincts.

At home on election day Slonczewski finally heard the news: the suit had made its way to the United States Supreme Court which, around 3:00 a.m., had upheld a lower court ruling allowing challengers to be present at the polls. Slonczewski then headed off to the Community Center where election officials were setting up the voting stations for a 6:30 a.m. opening. Slonczewski had assumed that her counterpart, the Republican challenger, would bring a list from which to question the eligibility of each student voter, and she herself came prepared to quarrel over every name. No such list ever appeared, however. “The Republicans bluffed,” she said.

As the morning was unfolding, it became clear that there were going to be difficulties. Slonczewski recorded problems as early as 8:00 a.m. when the College president’s husband was told that he couldn’t vote because his name was not on the list of registered voters. It was later discovered that his first and last names had been

reversed on the list. By 9:45 a.m., Emily Williams, a Kenyon student, had already waited for two hours. At 10:00 a.m. Slonczewski counted 200 people in line.

Meanwhile, she said, “one of the machines was functioning very poorly.” Reporting that she overheard a poll worker (Jo Rice) say, “Oh, that machine always gives trouble,” Slonczewski refused to see the malfunctioning machine as a mere coincidence. “It was known that Gambier was the largest and most democratic precinct in the district and they nonetheless gave it a bad machine.” Around 10:00 a.m. repairmen came to fix the machine, but they were hesitant to use the spare parts they had on hand for fear they would need them later in the day for some machine that completely stopped working. Slonczewski and others strongly implored the repairmen to fix the problem, and they did.

Because of the long lines, Slonczewski soon stopped being a challenger and turned into a manager. She left the voting room and began to police the line. “It felt like the titanic: women and children first!” There was no one else to take charge. The Republican challenger was constantly on the phone, presumably with Republican headquarters. People kept approaching Slonczewski and asking what they could do to help, and she repeatedly replied, “pizza and water.” By nightfall, three police officers arrived at the community center to provide emergency assistance.

Ohio law states that you must be in line by 7:30 p.m. to vote. When the deadline arrived, the police decided that the line, which still stretched out the door and through the parking lot, was unmanageable. They packed all the voters into the building. The circumstance was a clear fire hazard and students with asthma problems were complaining.

Soon, however, the voter relief prompted by a Democratic Party lawsuit arrived in the form of paper ballots. The chairmen of the two parties came to administer the new ballots, which were extra absentee ballots. Students were afraid that these ballots would not be counted and began yelling “no paper ballots” through the open windows into the voting room and the hallways. Slonczewski described this scene as “a zoo, a wild zoo.” In the end, only a hundred or so paper ballots were filled out, and the line remained long. Slonczewski stayed at the community center until the last vote was cast. “We were there till 4 a.m. cranking the machine.”

Slonczewski expressed great concern for what happened in Gambier. “This is how intimidation happens,” she said. “The whites in the south didn’t think they were doing anything when they were oppressing blacks in the 60’s; in the same way, Republicans don’t feel like they’re doing anything wrong when they are intimidating voters.” Despite her frustration, she appeared thrilled with the fact that 1,100 of the

1,300 registered voters in Gambier were dedicated enough to sacrifice their day to vote. “The voting rate was phenomenal.”

When asked if she felt the media sufficiently covered the event, Slonczewski replied that they only reported “half of the story.” The media interpreted the situation as a glory for democracy but did not address the issue of disenfranchisement, nor the inadequate machines. “They should have portrayed it as a voting fiasco. There were people who tried to vote and could not; that side of the story should have been portrayed.” Slonczewski had explained the failings of the election to the TV cameras, but “it was all edited out.” Nor did any of the media mention that Gambier voted 10:1 for Kerry: “Why wasn’t that big news? To me that would be phenomenal news.”

Slonczewski explained that the Knox County Board of Elections, instead of trying to acquire more voting machines, had had to spend much of the summer verifying signatures for Ralph Nader’s candidacy and for Issue 1, a ban on gay marriage. The latter issue did not originally receive enough signatures to be put on the ballot, but the Republican Secretary of State, J. Kenneth Blackwell, issued an extension because, Slonczewski feels, he knew that it would draw Bush supporters to the polls. “The Secretary of State essentially rigged behind the scenes how this election was likely to turn out. Partisan control of elections is ridiculous.”

Were student voters the root of the problem in Gambier? No, Slonczewski said, because even without the students Gambier would have had 800 community voters and only two machines. The day still would have been a debacle. “Do the math,” Slonczewski kept saying, “Do the math.”

-- Alexander Bender

### **Denise Needles**

In July 2004, Denise Needles began her volunteer work for the Bush-Cheney campaign. The campaign’s co-chair encouraged her to accept the position of the Republican poll watcher or “challenger” in Gambier on Election Day, and on November 2nd Needles served in that capacity for the first time.

She had attended a class to learn the nuances of the job. In these meetings, Needles and other Knox County poll watchers learned about the legality of having political propaganda at the polling place. They were instructed on how far any sort of campaign advertisements should be kept from the polling place, and what to do if this distance was violated. Needles told us that she was instructed not to talk to voters, but

instead to watch for “funny business.” During the election, she was required to call headquarters every few hours and give a report of the voting situation.

Her instructions may have been simple, but election day itself grew more and more complicated as it wore on. When one of Gambier’s two voting machines began malfunctioning soon after the polls opened, Needles realized it might be a difficult day. Even after the machine was fixed, there was no way to speed up the ever-growing line, or move it along quickly with only two machines.

As day wore on to night, Needles felt isolated and overwhelmed being the only Republican poll watcher at the Gambier Community Center. Nonetheless, she says, she tried to help maintain a calm and upbeat atmosphere. She was thrilled to be in the middle of this once-in-a-lifetime event. She admired the students, saying later that “they did good” by being so patient. She was proud of them for being willing to stand in line for nine hours in order to exercise their right to vote.

Denise Needles’ day at the polls ended before many of the students’ did. At 7:00 p.m., the county Republican co-chair told her she could leave, that there were not likely to be any problems she needed to watch out for. Although the Gambier election went on for nearly nine more hours, Needles was lucky enough to have her day end on schedule. Although this was an overwhelming first experience, Needles also found it exhilarating, and plans to act as a poll watcher in future elections.

-- Jessica Tindira & Allyson Whipple

## **Geoff Stokes**

Geoff Stokes, a tall man originally from Coventry, England, should have had a quite day as the Democratic poll watcher for the College Township. The Township poll serves the area surrounding the village of Gambier and, with only a few hundred registered voters, this year’s election turned out to be no different from years past. It was the *other* polling station in the Gambier Community Center that provided all the excitement, and when the College Township polls closed at 7:30 p.m., Stokes moved to help quell the chaotic line of students and other residents that snaked back and forth through the gymnasium and the hallways.

While Stokes and his wife have been U.S. citizens for six years, this was the first American election Stokes has worked on. “It’s just so much simpler over there,” he said, reflecting on voting in England.

Stokes does not think of his role in the polling process as that of a “challenger,” as much of the press has labeled it. He was in fact told by the local Democratic Party to do everything *but* challenge; he needed only to assist those voters whose registrations had become misplaced or misspelled. His job was to make sure everyone got to vote. His position carried no power over the voting process; he could only suggest to the presiding election judge possible mistakes and needed corrections.

At the polls he pulled people he knew who should have been voting in the College Township out of the endless Gambier line and brought them the no-wait College Township polling station. At one point he brought a provisional ballot to an old man who could not get out of his car, and stood by and watched as the man voted from the front seat of his Chevrolet in the parking lot of the Community Center.

Stokes was one of the first to figure out just how long the Gambier line would be, and when the polls would finally close. “At four in the afternoon, they posted 407 votes,” he reports. That works out to be around twenty votes-per-hour-per-machine, a far cry from forty votes-per-hour that the Knox County Board of Elections Chairperson Pamela Hinkens told us that the MicroVote machines could serve. Stokes easily estimated that if it had taken eight hours for 400 votes to be cast, then the polls would have to remain open for another twelve hours, as there were still at least 600 votes to be cast.

Asked what he thought about the early estimates of registered voters, Stokes said that the Board of Elections “clearly misjudged them.” “It is unreasonable to ask anyone to stand in line for over an hour,” Stokes said. “In this age of technology, there has to be a better way.” Stokes was quick to make clear that we were lucky this happened in Gambier, and not in a place where everyone did not know each other so well. “If this had been downtown Chicago, there would have very well been a riot.”

When the College Township precinct closed its polls at 7:30 p.m., Stokes moved to help keep the Gambier line under control. He made sure that non-students in need of assistance were given a chance to go to the front of the line. When asked about his general opinion of the students, Stokes said that “they were great.” He was also quick to point out that there were many non-students who also stood in the long line, and told of a woman with her baby who stood in the rain. “She waited three, four hours, on principle!”

At 9:30 p.m., Stokes helped form two new lines for the recently-arrived paper ballots. When someone shouted to the lines that the ballots would likely not be counted, however, the two lines quickly thinned out. Stokes said that he was impressed not only by the students and community members who waited so long in line, but by the volunteers who thought of nearly everything the waiting voters might need. “It was fun,”

Stokes said and, with a twinkle in his eye, indicated that he was looking forward to working at the polls again next election.

-- Jonathan Echlin

## Kirk Emmert

On November 2, 2004, Kirk Emmert stood at ground zero of the longest voting line in America. As Mayor of Gambier, he was responsible for the Community Center, where hundreds of people were lined up outside under a canopy of umbrellas. Responsibility for election matters, however, lay with Knox County officials, Emmert says, and he could do little but stand and watch.

“If you want answers, you need to talk to the Board of Elections.”

Now, several weeks later, he sits in his office, sipping tea out of a travel mug. Every wall is burdened with shelves of books; beside me, multiple copies of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* stand side by side, spines cracked with age and use. A picture of Joshua Chamberlain, commander of 20th Maine Volunteers during the Civil War, confirms the stern accomplishment of the bookshelves with which it shares the wall. Emmert steeples his fingers as he tells his view of the fiasco.

Obviously, scores of questions wait to be answered. Why were there only two machines? Why didn’t anyone see this coming? If the Board of Elections indeed had four weeks between the registration deadline and election day, how could they not have anticipated the Village precinct’s size?

“Public bodies move slowly,” Emmert says to explain the lack of preparation. “Everything needs to be done publicly. There are laws. There are routines.”

In addition, Emmert wonders if the board had adequate information to estimate the expected voter turnout and, if they had the information, could they have done anything about it?

Ten days before November 2nd, Emmert says, he contacted the board of elections in an attempt to obtain more machines. His request was denied; there were no extra machines. The two machines that Knox County keeps in reserve could be used only in the event of a machine failure. In Gambier on election day a machine was disabled for several hours, but no replacement was ordered because the problem was “reparable.”

Under the Help America Vote Act, the federal government allots grants to states and counties to help purchase additional voting machines. While this money could have relieved the choke, Emmert explains that the state “didn’t want to buy machines that didn’t produce a paper trail,” and that the money will be used in the future. According to Emmert, Knox County currently has “110-112” machines in service, but they hope soon to purchase “160” new units.

In addition to being Gambier’s mayor, Emmert serves the College directly as an esteemed member of the Political Science department. Famously conservative, the department differs from the rest of Kenyon, a predominantly liberal school judging from the percentage of students who voted for John Kerry. During the interview, when we assured Emmert that we “weren’t trying to implicate anyone,” he responded, “But you are. That’s where you’re trying to lead me, with these questions, and I’m not going to do it.”

Professor Emmert’s reaction is hardly surprising. How does a Republican member of the Kenyon faculty, being on the victor’s side in an increasingly partisan political environment, respond to the discontented left?

Mostly, they don’t. Most conservative professors admirably choose to leave partisan politics out of their teaching. “I’ve never hidden my views,” says History Professor Reed Browning, “but I don’t think I’ve ever trumpeted them.” Emmert’s colleague, Tim Spiekerman, likewise tries to “shy away from broadcasting my personal political views to students.”

Teaching at a college as liberal as Kenyon, a conservative professor could easily feel outnumbered, besieged, or even oppressed. Happily, Spiekerman reports quite the opposite: “I’ve always found Kenyon to be a congenial, decent place, where people with diverse views on diverse subjects can talk seriously and respectfully with one another.”

English Professor Timothy Shutt, while expressing respect and admiration for his liberal colleagues, feels marginalized because of his politics and Catholicism, which, he claims, they see as, “at best, off-putting.” In the English department particularly, he finds sincerity and honesty, but ultimately, alienation. “Their views are different from mine, and they are consistent, sincere, good in intention, and carefully thought out,” he says. “But I am not one of them.”

Browning similarly notes the need for an increased dialogue between the two political philosophies. The political imbalance, he says, “...does not serve the large majority of the faculty well, because they rarely get their ideas authentically tested in a debate. A community that claims that it exists to explore ideas openly and fairly would be better off--students and faculty both--if the political imbalance were not so glaring.”

-- Rob Kunzig

## John Ryerson

John Ryerson, a self-employed, middle-aged man who was the designated attorney for the Kerry Campaign in Knox County, walked into Gund Ballroom armed with a file folder of newspaper clippings about the 2004 presidential election. November 2nd was more than three weeks prior to our interview, yet Ryerson's eagerness to talk about the election and his disappointment regarding Kerry's early concession were still evident. Polite and friendly, Ryerson was forthright in describing his own role on election day but seemed adverse to criticizing anyone when discussing the voting lines in Gambier.

Ryerson worked in conjunction with the Democratic Party's voter protection project which "tried to identify precincts where there were likely to be problems." The precincts that included the Ohio State campus, for example, were targeted as potential hot spots for voter complications, including long lines. College and Village Townships were not identified as problem areas prior to the election; however, Ryerson believes that had the Democrats known about the giant increase in the number of registered voters in the precinct which included Kenyon College, they might have tried to get proactive voter relief.

Though he qualified this possibility by saying that courts are often reluctant to address an issue that has not yet happened, he explained that the prospective relief could have taken the form of early voting or extending voting past 7:30 p.m. so people could come later. The ultimate problem, according to Ryerson, was the unavailability of information regarding the number of registered voters. "I had no idea so many people had registered to vote. We didn't know how many new registrants there were."

Ryerson's anticipated role on election day was to respond to calls regarding voter problems. Once it became clear that extremely long lines in several precincts throughout Franklin and Knox Counties were leading to possible voter disenfranchisement, Ryerson and other members of the Democratic Party took action. A lawsuit was filed in the Federal District Court in Columbus against the Boards of Elections of Franklin and Knox Counties.

"There were probably people discouraged from voting. I'm sure of that," Ryerson said. "Plainly you're disenfranchising voters by making them wait that long." He said the Democratic Party filed the suit to make the Knox Board provide some sort of relief which they seemed unwilling or unable to provide earlier in the day. "I had contacted

them previously [before filing the lawsuit] and they said that there was nothing for them to do.” Between 7:30 and 8:00 PM, Ryerson brought a faxed copy of the ruling that ordered the Board of Elections to provide relief.

We explained that during an interview with the staff of the Knox County Board of Elections we had been told that the lawsuit was unnecessary, and that by the time Ryerson came the staff was already preparing paper ballots to alleviate the long lines. Ryerson responded by saying, “I think that’s a little disingenuous. I think that’s selective memory.” However, he was quick to praise the Board of Elections: “We have one of the better Boards of Election for a small county.”

Many people see a contrast between Ryerson’s active role on election day and what some see as Mayor Kirk Emmert’s laissez-faire attitude. This is a particularly sensitive subject, since Ryerson was one of the losing candidates who ran against Emmert in Gambier’s 2003 mayoral election. As with his comments on the Board of Elections, Ryerson seemed hesitant to implicate or criticize Emmert, insisting that he “wanted to be polite.” Though he appeared to want to say more, Ryerson remained respectful and positive. “In fairness to Kirk, nobody anticipated what would happen that day. He wasn’t in charge of elections.”

When asked about the media coverage of the event, Ryerson saw its pros and cons. “It’s obviously good for the College,” he said, but not good for the county. Though a proud Kenyon College alumnus, Ryerson resented the media’s focus on students: “Drawing a distinction between students and non-students is unfair.” Ryerson praised Kenyon students for their patience and devotion to the right to vote, but he thought the student-focused coverage had the potential to add to and aggravate town and gown divisions in Gambier. He pointed out that townspeople waited and voted alongside students.

As the interview came to a close, Ryerson turned away from the specific issues about voting machines and long lines and talked about the future. “You have to thank people,” he said. “The Democratic party has to thank its voters.” Organizing this “Thank You” is the new focus of Ryerson’s energy.

-- Lindsey Eckert

## **Michael Klein**

Michael Klein strides through the dismal December weather into the Middle Ground coffee shop, his shaved scalp making him instantly distinguishable from the

other studying and shivering patrons. He shrugs off his rain-spattered outer clothes to reveal a gray, knitted turtleneck sweater and a friendly smile. “Phew,” he says, shaking his head in a doglike manner, “it’s terrible out there.” Klein volunteered this year as an organizer for the Democratic Party in Knox County, Ohio. A twenty-six year old graduate of Kenyon College and hopeful applicant to law school, Klein has volunteered in every election since he turned eighteen and hopes to pursue an education in voting law.

For the 2004 presidential election, Klein took on the duty of organizing the poll watchers, canvassers, and runners working in Knox county. The Kenyon vote was one of his top priorities from the beginning, because in other elections “a bigger Kenyon turnout could have made the difference.” Prior to the election, Klein believed that the greatest threat to the Kenyon voters was likely to be disputes sparked by the question of residency—some officials questioned the right of out-of-state students to vote on campus, and the Democratic Party feared challengers at the polls. Klein never even suspected the glitch that would in fact result in some students waiting up to eleven hours at the polls.

Klein wasn’t expecting more than five hundred voters to show up at the Gambier polling place, less than half of the actual turnout. In the month before the election, he had attempted to learn the exact number of registered voters in the Gambier precinct but, due to an obscure and complicated point of protocol, the Board of Elections declared that they were unable to give him the information. Klein had gone personally to the Board, only to be told that for fifteen days before an election the Board’s printing machines may only be used to print material necessary for the election. Printing a list of registered voters was not allowed under that restriction.

Whatever the number of registered voters, it became clear early on election day that there was a problem. The line at the polling center wasn’t moving nearly fast enough to accommodate the exponentially increasing number of voters. “It was sort of this growing wave,” Klein says, illustrating with an expansive gesture. One of the poll watchers from Gambier telephoned repeatedly with pleas for Klein to, “do something, do something, do something.” The Democratic Party called Klein, too, deploying him to Gambier with the instructions, “we need every vote--keep them there, whatever you can do.”

The Democratic Party was also on the phone to their team of lawyers and to the local Board of Elections. Under the Ohio code, the Board was legally obligated to provide voters with an alternate way of voting if the voting facilities provided proved to be insufficient for any reason. By nightfall, the Gambier precinct line ended up in

federal court as one of the examples used to force the Board of Elections to comply with the Ohio code. The Board decided to provide relief in the form of paper ballots, a choice which surprised and slightly worried Klein. "I think the paper ballots were probably O.K.," he allowed, but also mentioned that the order that produced the ballots was itself contested and, in a close election, might have been thrown out. It was safer to vote under the old rules. "If you were on the machine, there's no way they can throw out your vote."

Klein remained at the community center until all the voting was finished, much longer than his job actually required. Once there, Klein said, he found himself inspired by the dedication and perseverance of both the students and the volunteers. "There was a volunteer who came in in tears saying, 'These students, what can we do for them?' and that's what got us motivated." After the last vote was cast, Klein was the one who called in the numbers to the Democratic headquarters in Columbus. Rumors of conspiracy sizzled from one end of the line to the other, speculation on possibly party affiliations and hidden agendas of poll workers and Board members. Klein insists there was no ill will or conspiracy behind the events on election day. "It wasn't people trying to screw over the students; it was maybe a little of incompetence."

After the election the Democratic Party threw a party for its volunteers; the Gambier vote was seen as a huge triumph, and everyone cheered Michael Klein. Klein wants people to remember that the lines at Kenyon, while an extraordinary showing of effort by the students and volunteers, need to be viewed as more than "a cute human interest story" because "this is a really horrific sort of thing that happened." He considers even a four-hour wait to vote to be "obscene," and firmly believes that things need to change. However, Klein describes the events at the Gambier polling place as one of the most positive aspects of the election. "If things had turned out to be boring and we still lost," he announces, philosophically, "I would have been a bit bummed out."

-- Rebecca Kathleen Cole

## **Lindsay Noonan**

By the time I spoke with Lindsay Noonan, we had completed several rounds of phone tag. Her speaking voice had been foreshadowed by her voice mail messages, soft and calm. She would have sounded timid had she not spoken so clearly and directly. Lindsay is a sophomore at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, and is an

officer in the College Democrats there. She's from the area, so on November 2nd she voted in Mount Vernon. When I asked her about her experience that day, she began slowly, pausing often to think.

"I just went with my parents, and there was a really long line. There were two precincts in the same place--one had a lot more voters than the other one, and there were two [machines] for each, even though one line was bigger than the other. Luckily, my parents and I were in the smaller one, so it didn't take too, too long, maybe thirty, forty minutes. The other line went outside and around the building. We were there early, around seven in the morning."

Noonen reports that, as in Gambier, voters were puzzled by the difference in the two lines. "People in the longer line were like, 'well why didn't they split this up a little better?' It was just a little strange how they split it up. It may have been the same area of land or something but there were less people who lived in my area."

I asked Noonen to describe the mood at the Mount Vernon polls and she told me that "when we were there, people were talking and joking. It wasn't too big a deal, but we were towards the front of the line, and I think people farther back were a little grumbly. Nobody was too upset--I think they expected it. Some were a bit stressed because they were at work and they needed to get back to work and it was taking longer than they thought it would...."

"Were there any problems?" I asked.

"The biggest thing was parking. People parked all along the roadway; it just wasn't very pretty," she laughed.

We had heard that voting wasn't as bottlenecked at "the Naz" (as the University is called) because most students voted absentee. Something like 85% of students at the Nazarene are Ohio natives, and had no particular incentive to vote locally in Knox County. When I asked Lindsay about this she confirmed the degree of absentee voting, saying that "it was really encouraged just because, I think, they foresaw a great deal more people voting because there were so many people registered. I know a few people who drove to their homes, people who live hours away, because they forgot to get their absentee ballots in." She also said that resident students who did not vote absentee voted at the Career Center at the University--not with local residents of Mount Vernon--unless, like Lindsay, they were from the area.

When I asked her what morale had been like on campus before the election Lindsay reflected for a while, then spoke quickly: "I'm a Democrat and it's not common at the Naz to be a Democrat. There were a lot of stupid people making comments about things, and there wasn't a lot of open-mindedness, to say the least. But I think that's the

mindset of a lot of people in Mount Vernon. I think people in general aren't very accepting." She paused again. "It wasn't incredibly horrible, but there were some times when it was a little overwhelming.... I guess I accepted that when I took the role [in the College Democrats] at the beginning of the year."

Thanking her for taking the time to talk with me, I closed by asking what the students at her school had heard about Kenyon on election day. "There was an e-mail that went around," she told me, and the campus Democrats "took a load of students out just to visit with the people waiting in line. They wanted to try to keep up the morale, keep people in line. They wanted to help people not get discouraged from voting. I think the whole community was trying to work together."

-- Amy Strieter

## **Ric Sheffield**

At 5:53 p.m., November 2, 2004, Cause No. C2-04-1055 appeared in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio, Eastern Division. Filed by the Columbus law firm of Porter, Wright, Morris, & Arthur on behalf of the Ohio Democratic Party, the suit sought an immediate temporary restraining order to keep the polls open past 7:30 p.m., and to provide citizens with whatever means necessary to vote. Affidavits from a number of Gambier residents were attached; in one of them, Kenyon English Professor David Lynn wrote, "I have observed people leave the line due to frustration. I may not be able to vote for 4-5 hours." The defendants listed were the Boards of Election in Knox and Franklin counties, and "J. Kenneth Blackwell, Secretary of State, in his official capacity."

The U. S. District Judge, Algenon Marbley, soon issued the restraining order: "the defendants shall keep the polls open," he wrote, and "are required to provide paper ballots or another mechanism to provide an adequate opportunity to vote." Marbley was later quoted in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* as having said that "participation in this democracy should not be as onerous as it is being made here today." When the Franklin County Board of Elections argued that voters always have the choice to wait in line or leave, Marbley had replied, "that imposes an undue burden on the right to vote and in effect could amount to a denial of that right."

Soon after the restraining order was issued, Secretary of State Blackwell filed a countersuit to contest it, dismissing every point that the Democratic Party had

enumerated. Ric Sheffield summarized Blackwell's method in three words, "Deny, deny, deny."

Sheffield, a Kenyon Sociology professor and attorney at law, sits in his office at Palme House. He is dressed semi-casually, his buttoned shirt mellowed by blue jeans and Nikes. He holds a photocopy of Blackwell's response, shrewdly dissecting it with trained eyes.

According to Sheffield, the State employed defense tactics common in such lawsuits; they merely denied allegations of wrongdoing. Since the plaintiffs sought emergency relief with respect to the election at hand, relief that the court did in fact grant, the remedies proposed essentially became moot, effectively expiring once the polls had closed. Thus, the consequence was not merely the voluntary dismissal of the suit but the permanent loss of this particular opportunity to exercise the elective franchise for those for whom the remedy was too late. The technical counterpoints raised by Blackwell's office were much less interesting or telling than the State's decision to oppose the action in the first place.

Sheffield says he's less interested in the actual suit than in the "human drama" behind its filing and its motivations. Despite the fact that the election is over, he says that "issues, obviously, still remain," and speculates about what happens when long lines discourages voters. Is it the fault of the government, or just bad luck?

Sheffield readily admits his partisan slant. His research specialty is Reconstruction era voting rights enforcement, a concern that focuses not just on the South after the Civil War, where southern Democrats carried out a "systematic, perhaps sinister, plan to deny the right to vote," but also on strategies to disenfranchise African Americans, largely, and (ironically) Republicans, here in Ohio, "way up North in Dixie." He told us that local Republicans during this past election "could not be excited" about the large number of registered voters in Gambier, most of whom are students at Kenyon College, and most of whom voted Democrat. Kenyon perhaps is regarded by some in this community as a "bastion of liberalism, in the political sense of the word rather than the philosophical," which, Sheffield says, is why Republican officials might display an "insensitivity" to or disinclination to remedy the logistical polling problems encountered by the College's community. Such circumstances have led to speculation among our students about the possibility of a conspiracy to swing the election in the favor of the Republican Party. "It is hard for me to imagine even with an uneventful election that the outcome of the presidential race could be decided by how many Kenyon students chose to vote in Gambier as opposed to the cities and states from which they came."

Another interesting dynamic, Sheffield mentions, is raised by issues of class: is a certain group of people more able to vote than another? Kenyon students, he said, are part of a “privileged class,” who were able to wait in line and miss obligations with little or no consequence. For many jobholders, however, the long line meant that the right to vote was sacrificed to professional obligations. While some Kenyon students may feel disenfranchised by the long lines, the “stakes were much higher” for those who had to bring home a paycheck.

Will the good cheer of Kenyon’s resilience overshadow the unanswered questions of November 2, 2004? Sheffield doesn’t think so. When people fondly remember the election, he says, they will remember as well the possible injustice and disenfranchisement. What happened in Gambier on November 2nd will “serve as both a rite of passage and a focal point” for future voting reform energies.

-- Nick O’Brien

### **Ed Tumidanski**

We decide to meet on the patio of the Gambier Deli. He’s there when I arrive at 11:00 a.m., sitting upright, arms crossed, in a green plastic porch chair. He’s svelte for a man of seventy: a Sean Connery type, with his white hair and black turtleneck. We comment on the weather--gray, rainy, yet oddly warm--then we’re all business. “So you were the presiding Judge?” I ask. And like that, judicially setting his large hands on the table (I’m impressed with the nugget of gold on his finger), the interview begins.

On November 2, 2004, Ed Tumidanski, retired General Electric engineer, arrived at the Gambier Community Center at 6 a.m. Like all the other voting days, in his ten years as presiding judge, the first hour ran smoothly. He opened the voting machines, delegated the various jobs of the day to his fellow poll workers, and then took a seat before the registration book where he welcomed the first voter at 6:30 a.m. Soon after, with mounting lines, Ed became concerned.

“By 8:00 a.m., with the long lines and only two machines, we knew there was trouble,” he says, “so I called the Election Board. They said they didn’t have any more machines and just told me to do the best I could do.”

Ed continued doing his best, welcoming voters, checking their signatures with the signatures he had in the overflowing binder. “Yes,” he says, “there were so many new registered voters that we could hardly close the binder. The Board of Elections could have at least bought us a bigger binder.”

Around 9 a.m., up went the second red-flag as one of the buttons on a machine began malfunctioning.

“The button you press to register your vote started sticking, so that voters were walking away from the machine without casting their vote,” he explained. “There’s a red light on the front of the machine that flips off when the vote’s been registered. So, when people started walking away with that red light still on, we knew something was wrong. The poll worker monitoring the machines would have to walk them back to the booth and make sure they pressed the button really hard, again and again, until it went through.”

In response to the bad button, Ed again called the Board of Elections. It took a while for the repair men to get there and when they did arrive, Ed noted how long it took them to fix the machine: “The two of them sat there deciding whether or not they should replace the button. I finally said, ‘You better change that switch,’ and so they did.”

The button was fixed, but the lines kept getting longer. Ed kept calling the Board. “I called twelve to twenty-four times throughout the day,” he says. “They just kept telling me to deal with it.”

Though the day was long, Ed dealt well. As judge, other than sticky buttons and long lines, Ed didn’t have too many other problems to deal with.

“Later in the day, some kids had posters they were holding up by the windows,” a violation of rules against campaigning close to a polling place. “I notified the police officer and he took care of it. For the most part, under the circumstances, I have to commend those in line. There were no complaints about unruly people.”

By late evening, Ed was beat.

“I left at 9 p.m.,” he says. “I was exhausted, so the members from the Election Board filled in for me.”

Though it states in Tumidanski’s election manual that “*all election officials must remain at the polling place until the supplies are packed and all work is completed,*” the Election Board “realized how tired I was and sent me home.” Rita Yarman, the Deputy Director who took over for him when he left, stayed at the polls until they closed around 4:00 a.m.

Though impressed with the voters’ resolve to wait in line, Tumidanski was very frustrated after the election. “The Board of Elections should have planned better,” he says. “The situation was a complete disservice to the public. And to me. I don’t mind volunteering but they better tell me the whole story.”

Tumidanski is an active volunteer in the Knox County community; some years ago, he and his wife started Hospice in Mount Vernon. And he’s been an election judge

for many years. "I began judging to help out the town. I'm paid for my work, about \$84 per day, but I'm obviously not doing it for the money. It's not much."

Especially on a day like November 2nd. With little pecuniary reward and more significantly, little respect from his superiors, Ed was naturally upset.

"Even at the judges' meeting, held a week before the elections, the Board didn't really mention the increase in voters," he complains. "This year, it only lasted an hour. They talked mostly about witnesses, challengers, little things like the fact there were more candidates to write in for President. In fact, they tell us these things so quickly that we all walk away and say, 'Now what the hell did they just say?'"

Though not happy that "my guy didn't win," Tumidanski seemed, at the moment, even less happy with the local Board of Elections: "I just don't think they were thinking. I think it was a shame. Where I come from, people get fired for not doing their job."

-- Emily King

## **Public Meeting of the Board of Elections**

The Knox County Board of Elections held an open meeting in Mount Vernon on November 19, two and a half weeks after the election. All four members of the board were present: Thomas F. McHugh (Democrat and chairperson), Kenneth E. Lane (R), William A. Eagon (D), and J. William Moody (R). They were joined by the staff director, Pamela Hinkens (R), and the deputy director, Rita Yarman (D).

Two of us attended the meeting, along with Rob McDonald, the Gambier village administrator.

Questions and comments from this tiny audience were limited to three minutes. Mr. McDonald presented suggestions for future elections and a summary of what it had cost the town to keep the Community Center open all night. The evening's activities had produced 71 bags of trash.

In response to one of our questions, director Hinkens said that to buy a new voting machine before the election would have cost \$5,000, if one could have been found.

One of the members of the Board said that the problem in Gambier wasn't a matter of "we didn't see" what was coming, but that the Board's "options were limited." There was "not a whole heck of a lot we could do." He gave as an analogy farmers in Iowa some years back who knew the Mississippi was going to flood; all they could do was say "yup, it's going to flood." "We did the best we could under the circumstances."

We asked about the Ohio law which says that if the poll workers call for “additional ballots or supplies..., the board...shall supply them as speedily as possible.” Reminding the that presiding judge Tumidanski made such a call, we asked how they had responded.

Director Hinkens replied that a lot of Ohio law “is geared around punch card ballots,” not the kind of electronic machines we have. “We hated the fact that there were no machines to take down” to Gambier, one Board member said. By the time that Tumidanski called, he said, “it was kind of late.”

-- Lewis Hyde & Amy Strieter

### **Pamela Hinkens & Rita Yarman**

Staff of the Knox County Board of Elections

On a sunny December day, exactly a month after the Gambier polls closed, we drove the five miles from Gambier to Mount Vernon to visit the staff of the Knox County Board of Elections. We found Pamela Hinkens and Rita Yarman, the director and deputy director respectively, in the Board’s suite of offices on the second floor of the old Mercy Hospital, now the Knox County Service Center.

They led us down a hallway and into a carpeted, fluorescent-lit conference room where we gathered our chairs in a circle around a group of conference tables.

We asked them first to explain how a Board of Election comes into being. Pam Hinkens said that Boards in Ohio have four members, two each from the parties that came in first and second in the last governor’s race. The Board in turn hires a staff: a director, a deputy director; Knox County also has two clerical workers. The staff is as bipartisan as the Board, the director and deputy director belonging to different political parties. In Knox County the director is a Republican.

The members of the Board itself are nominated by the local political parties and then appointed by the Ohio Secretary of State. Each member serves a four-year term. Board members are paid a nominal amount calibrated to the size of the voting population.

When we began to quiz her about the voting machines, Hinkens explained that the state of Ohio had intended to buy new electronic equipment before the November election but that problems having to do with national standards for such machines had made the state postpone the purchase. After the 2000 election, Congress had passed

the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which funded a mandate calling for every state to have new machines in place for this fall's election. Ohio counties had been selecting vendors to provide these machines but, "in the late spring, early summer," Hinkens said, the state--in response to public protests--announced that all new machines had to provide a "voter-verified paper audit trail." As none of the machines under consideration provided such a trail, and as it was late in the process, the state applied for a waiver to exempt Ohio from the HAVA mandate.

Thus, at the beginning of the summer, Knox County was left to work with the voting machines it had on hand. The machines used in Gambier were labeled "MicroVote MV464"; they are manufactured by the MicroVote General Corporation of Indianapolis, Indiana ([www.microvote.com](http://www.microvote.com)). These are electronic machines that leave an internal, rather than "voter-verified," paper audit trail.

Knox County first bought its MicroVote equipment for the presidential election of 1996. At the time the county had about 27,000 registered voters and purchased 116 machines.

In last month's election, there were 37,000 registered voters and 114 MicroVote machines, two of the originals having broken in the eight years since they were first put in use. The MV464 is no longer manufactured, Hinkens told us, nor can one get spare parts.

There are 56 voting precincts in Knox County, and it is the policy of the Board to place a minimum of two machines in each precinct. In this election, therefore, 112 machines went out to the precincts and 2 were held in reserve for emergencies. One of these was used during the day when a machine in Morgan Township "totally went down." The other was used for spare parts--some of which went to Gambier to repair the machine whose switch began to stick.

*The Columbus Dispatch* reports that in Summit County (which includes Akron) the Board of Elections has a standard of one machine per 100 registered voters and that to meet that goal the Summit Board of Elections had rented 600 additional machines for this election. (11/5/04) [Footnote: In Guernsey County, we later learned, the ration is 1 machine / 150 registered voters.] We asked Hinkens first of all if this Board has a standard ratio of voters to machines. Rather than respond directly she noted that only three counties in Ohio use electronic voting machines, and two used electrical scan voting machines. Her point seemed to be that different machines would require different ratios. Then she said that when the machines were new in 1996 there were more than enough for the 27,000 registered voters. [Footnote: With 116 machines, the County

then provided one machine per 233 voters.] She also noted that the government standard in the HAVA legislation provides funds for one machine for every 200 voters in the 2000 election. She also pointed out that under HAVA the county will receive funding for 160 new electronic machines, which she seems to think will be enough.

Our question was never answered directly, however, and this left the impression that in this election, with 112 machines for 37,000 registered voters and thus a ratio of 1 machine to 330 voters (and in Gambier, 1 to 650), the Board is aware that they were well over any of the conventional standards under discussion.

We then turned to the question of the Board's sense of how many people could vote per hour on the machines provided. Our own experience indicated that the number was about 45 per hour voting on the two machines in Gambier and at first Hinkens agreed with that figure. When we pointed out that her own professed pre-election estimate was that 800 voters would turn out in Gambier, and that that would have meant a seventeen-hour line, she seemed momentarily confused. She then backed up and told us that the number for two machines was closer to 80, not 45. Then she said that we needed voter education. "A lot of people didn't understand how the machine worked."

When we asked Hinkens about purchasing or renting other machines, as both Cuyahoga and Summit Counties had done, she at first replied "I think they're paper," meaning that other counties use more readily available paper ballot machines; she then reiterated that Knox County's electronic machines are no longer built.

But if that was the problem, why couldn't a county have two kinds of voting machines--say punch cards on some precincts and MicroVote machines in others? Hinkens's reply was a description of the difficulty that would cause: "We would have to then have a second data base and two different elections." When the election was over they would have to combine the data from the two kinds of machines; the poll workers would be unfamiliar with the second kind of machine, and would have to be trained; time was short.

Clearly it would be more difficult to run such an election, though apparently it could be done; it would not be illegal.

At one point we asked if any of this year's problems arose because of a lack of funding. "Money was not the biggest deficit in this election," Hinkens replied, and turned immediately to the issue of voter turn out. "To be quite honest, it was never anticipated. We knew there was a large increase in registration, but we didn't expect that large of a

turnout.” “In the past, people have registered heavily before an election but then not showed up.” Last March 230 people voted in Gambier. Hinkens said that she had expected 700 or 800 voters in the Gambier precinct. When we told her that Tom McHugh, a Democratic member of the Board of Elections, was quoted in the newspaper saying, “we were expecting up to 80% of the electorate...to turn out,” she and Rita Yarman both expressed surprise and said they could not comment on behalf of McHugh. (*Collegian* 11/4/04)

[Footnote: The current budget of the Knox Board is \$300,00 a year, Hinkens told us. Before the election, the *Mount Vernon News* reported that on October 21st Hinkens and McHugh met the County commissioners to request an additional \$23,000 to cover this year’s unusual expenses. At that meeting Hinkens also reported that the County had 37,000 registered voters. (10/26/04)]

Later in the interview, Hinkens returned to the question of voter turnout. “We were in awe ourselves; we did not anticipate 1,100” voters in Gambier. Asked if the Board made a practice of forecasting the vote she said, “No, because our office is small. There’s just Rita and myself. When you’re limited with resources, what you have is what you have, and you can’t get blood out of a turnip.” She also told us that in this election, registration itself was hard to estimate. Some of the registration cards that were mailed to the Secretary of State in Columbus did not arrive in Mount Vernon until two weeks before the election.

We told her that in both newspaper articles and an interview with us Gambier Mayor Kirk Emmert had said that he had phoned the Board ten days before the election and asked for more machines, only to be denied. Hinkens reply was firm: “I personally talked to Mr. Emmert and he never asked me for more machines. His issue was the security issue.” He wanted to make sure that there were sufficient deputy sheriffs on duty during the day, she said. “He was just concerned about the large turnout and the challengers.”

When we asked if he might have called another time and talked with someone else she said that she had asked around the office and “no one recalled” taking such a call.

[ Footnote: Asked by e-mail to clarify this confusion, Mayor Emmert replied: “I called her and asked if it were possible to get more machines or to use one of the machines in the Township for the Village. She said we could not use the Township machine and that she had no more machines. I later learned that state law requires each voting constituency to have two machines, and others confirmed that the Board did not have extra machines.”]

We next turned our attention to what happened on election day itself. In response to the rumor that Gambier's balky machine was known ahead of time to give trouble, Hinkens said that there was no way to have known such a thing. All machines are tested prior to the election, and they are then distributed at random to the precincts; the only identifying mark differentiating one machine from another is a serial number on the back. As for why it took so long to repair the broken machine she said, first, that it was "not totally down. When you hit the 'cast vote' button" it didn't always respond. Second, "we had other machines that we thought were down," and if the repair crew was "in Jefferson township, that's 25 minutes away." As for why the crew paused over replacing the button, they may have hesitated to use their last spare part.

As for supplying extra voting materials, we began by noting if a presiding judge calls for additional ballots, Ohio Law requires that the Board "shall supply them as speedily as possible." How does the Board explain its inaction, given Tumidanski's repeated calls? Hinkens began her reply by explaining to us the complexities of paper ballots, the point being that using such ballots appeared to be the only solution but not one that could easily be put into play.

The Board uses the same "electrically stripped" paper ballot for both absentee and provisional voting. Provisional ballots are those cast by voters who believe they have registered, but whose names do not appear in the polling book. Such ballots go into a yellow envelop on election day and each is later adjudicated by the Board.

For this election, the Board ordered 6,500 of these paper ballots (whereas they normally order 2,500, Hinkens said). Many were used for absentee voters, and 2,240 were sent to the precincts on election day, 40 to each. At some point during the day the Board had 300 paper ballots left in Mount Vernon. They did not feel, however, that they could send them to Gambier because "we had people lined up here" in need of additional provisional ballots. Hinkens felt that to send paper ballots to Gambier before the polls closed would have potentially disenfranchised some voter who needed a provisional ballot from the Board's central office. "We would not have anything for them to vote on, period."

Hinkens told us that the Board was discussing what to do much of the day. She herself called the Secretary of State's office to ask what to do, and they told her that "by law" if there were working machines, voters simply had to "choose to stay" in line or not. "As long as you have machines that are working, that's what you have," they told her. "You're within your rights," they said, to leave the situation alone. Hinkens sees the

Secretary of State's office as ultimately responsible for voter problems, saying that the Knox County Board of Elections was "the lowest on the totem pole."

The background story about paper ballots still did not explain why it took a court order to get them to Gambier, and why they showed up two hours after the polls closed. When we raised these points, Hinkens told us that in fact the Board had begun to ready the ballots as soon as the polls closed at 7:30 p.m. The ballots need to be prepared to indicate the precinct they belong to, and this takes time. Then they needed to be driven to Gambier. She thinks that they arrived by 9:00 p.m. Hinkens contended that the Board was at work on this problem before the court order arrived.

The presiding judge at the Gambier polls, Ed Tumidanski, left at 9:00 p.m. (replaced by Rita Yarman), despite the written requirement that he stay until the polls closed. "With Ed it was a health issue," Pam explained. "Was it going to be the fact that we were going to end up calling the emergency squad for him?" Hinkens then went quickly on to tell us a story about a woman presiding judge in a previous election who had been relieved of her duties when news came that her husband had died.

When we suggested that long voting lines amounted to a form of disenfranchisement, Hinkens bristled. To her way of thinking, where there is disenfranchisement, "that's just blatantly when we don't have anything there to vote on."

During our interview, deputy director Yarman spoke very little. At the end, however, we asked her one question directly. After the election, we had read the following in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*:

It was the "sheer numbers" that stacked up voters, said Rita Yarman, deputy elections director in Knox County, who hears complaints about waiting times every presidential year. People voluntarily line up for hours to buy tickets to rock concerts, she noted. [11/7/04]

Some of us had found an unfortunate confusion of entertainment and civic duty in this remark, but Yarman was unapologetic. "Yup, that sounds like me," she said, and went on to say that there are voters who complain if they have to stand in line for as little as twenty minutes. She wanted us to know, too, that "in our community"--meaning Mount Vernon--there are many people who work twelve-hour days, doctors and nurses for example. If such people cannot vote because of their working conditions, that is not disenfranchisement, "it's because of the position they chose."

Hinkens and Yarman had offered us an hour of their time and by now we had been with them for an hour and a half, so we drew things to a close. As we stood to go, Hinkens told us that she believes that the underlying problems with voting in Ohio derive from the way the voting laws are written; if we really wanted to change things we should write to our state representatives with suggestions as to how the statutes might be changed. We should be able to fill out ballots before election day; there should also be a longer period between the voter registration deadline and election day. If her office had had sixty days this year, they would not have been caught so short of time.

\* \* \*