

MY TURN**In New Hampshire,
a great way to vote**Election Day is a
friendly town affairBy **DEBORAH STONE**
For the Monitor

In 1980, when I moved to Lempster and wanted to register to vote, people told me to go see Alice Bruno. She was the town clerk and conducted business from her home. I expected some sort of small-town, circle-the-wagons resistance and came armed with documents to prove I was a resident, but when I knocked on the door and introduced myself, Alice invited me in, made some tea, and we sat around her kitchen table talking and filling out the form.

As I recall, Alice never asked to see any proof of anything. I told her whose house I'd bought, and that was that. We were both recently divorced, and Alice, a good 30 years my elder, was more interested in promoting my social life. "You have anybody you want come up there visiting you, and don't you mind what nobody says," she advised.

I got to thinking about Alice recently as I've heard reports on the troubled state of American elections. In Louisiana and Florida, early voters showed up at polling places only to find lines several hours long. In some places "party thugs" have "scrubbed" and "purged" the voter lists, disenfranchising thousands at a pop. In New Mexico, even a county elections supervisor was removed from the voter list without his knowledge. In some places, zealous election officials are matching drivers' licenses or Social Security numbers to computer lists and if there's a discrepancy of so much as a single letter or numeral, off with the voter's name. The presidential campaigns plan to station lawyers at polling places in hotly contested states to assist would-be voters who get challenged or turned away. Some cities and towns are apparently calling on security personnel, police and other tough guys to deal with any rowdiness.

Really, if all you knew about voting came from the national news, you'd think it was a gladiator sport. Indeed 10 days ago the

He refused, not exactly politely, and left. No lawyers, no cops, no thugs, no headlines.

Handicapped accessibility? Our school is wheelchair accessible, if you count a dirt parking lot as wheelchair friendly. Four years ago, the town acquired a voting machine for the visually impaired, but according to Shklar, no one uses it because "it's like voting into the voice mail system from hell." I asked about one of my neighbors who has macular degeneration. Not even him? "No, no one," Michael said. "We offer anyone who's visually impaired two choices. You can use the machine or you can have a regular ballot, and if you need help, the moderator will go into the booth with you to help you."

I can just imagine how that would go down in Chicago or in the studios of NBC.

Easter Island idol

All right, we've gotten our ballots and marked them in privacy—what next? Here's the part I find utterly charming. We march one-by-one, across the gym to a 100-year-old, quarter-sawn oak ballot box, perched on a folding table like some kind of ancient Easter Island idol. The moderator stands tall behind the box, eyes upon us, as if expecting our tribute. From experience, I know that he stands ready to prevent people from inserting our own ballots into the box, because I have tried a few times — it seemed the right thing to do, *casting your vote* — and been chastised. The town clerk, seated beside him, says our name and checks it off on her list. Only then does the moderator take the ballot and deposit it in the box.

Curious about the origins of this quaint tradition, I called the moderator the other night. He read to me from RSA 659:23, a section that begins with a bland title — "Folding and Depositing the Ballot" — but goes on to prove that somewhere along the way, our legislators had a glorious sense of pomp: "Before leaving the voting booth, the voter shall fold his ballot in the same way it was folded when received by him and shall keep it folded so that the marks on it cannot be seen. He shall then proceed to the checkout table and shall announce his

New York Times warned, "For this election, voters need to be prepared to fight for their right to cast a vote."

Not so in Lempster, nor, I dare say, in the rest of New Hampshire. But the mere depiction of electoral life elsewhere makes me appreciate how much more we have to cherish than our the first-in-the-nation primary.

Word gets around

Lempster's town clerk now has a real office with a computer, and though she doesn't serve tea, she knows and chats with everyone who comes by to do business. When people want to register, she will ask to see a license or a picture ID, and if it doesn't show Lempster as their address, she'll ask to see a phone or electric bill. With a population of about 1,000, there's a good chance that word has already gotten 'round when somebody new moves into town, so no one goes berserk about Social Security numbers or matching computer lists.

Our elections are sociable, orderly, and trustworthy. As you enter the school gymnasium, you'll be greeted by the three elected supervisors of the checklist, who are there to register any new resident who wants to register and vote on the same day. If you're already registered, you'll head to the table of volunteer election assistants to get your ballot. Officially, you're supposed to announce your name, but one of the volunteers usually calls it out first, and then the person with your part of the alphabet checks you off on her list and hands you a ballot. IDs? Nope - we vote here on our personal recognizance and our say-so.

If there's not a big line behind you, you'll probably schmooze a bit with the officials, and when you're done, you'll take your ballot and move on into one of the three voting booths, where you'll find a pencil.

What about challenges, those attempts to keep ineligible people from voting but that many people suspect are partisan tactics to suppress voting by the other side? Any citizen may challenge another's right to vote, but in Lempster it has happened only once in the 16-year tenure of Moderator Michael Shklar. Quite a few people knew that the man in question lived elsewhere. He was offered a chance to sign an affidavit swearing that he lived in town, and acknowledging that he understood lying was punishable by jail.

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name to the town clerk who shall repeat the name and place a mark beside it on his checklist. The voter shall then present the ballot with official endorsement uppermost to the moderator who shall then deposit the ballot in the ballot box."

Who knew this is what we are doing when we vote?

No worries

Elsewhere in the country, people worry their votes won't count. They worry that party operatives have been scheming to fix the voting machines, misprint the ballots, or throw out their ballots because they didn't mark or poke them correctly. They worry, with good reason, that if they vote early, their ballots might get lost; that software glitches will mysteriously eradicate their votes; or that optical scanners won't even be able to read their ballots.

I don't have any doubts about vote-counting in Lempster because usually I help count and I know how it's done. It's quite wonderful, reminiscent of a grade-school exercise. After making sure that every ballot provided by the state has been accounted for, the moderator divides up the ballots among groups of three volunteers. Each group has a reader who unfolds the ballots and reads off the selected names; a tallier who makes hatch marks on a tally sheet as the reader reads; and a checker, positioned to see both the reader's ballot and the tallier's sheet.

The moderator and town clerk consolidate the totals from each group and, to great suspense, announce the results. The moderator calls the final tally into the AP wire service, then seals the ballots in a special box with special tape provided by the state and drives them to the Newport police station.

The entire counting process is done in the open, with curious watchers circulating among the counters. It would be mighty difficult for the reader to "misread" a vote or the tallier to slide a hatch mark into another candidate's box without someone noticing.

Into the wee hours, the volunteers keep themselves going on brownies, cookies, apples, doughnuts, coffee, soda and whatever else the citizens have brought during the course of the day. We've moved into the modern age in Lempster, and we comply with state election laws, but our elections still breathe the spirit of Alice Bruno's kitchen table.