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TEN BEST: VOTING FACTS AND MYTHS

By Brian Clarey

Americans love to vote: MYTH

When we started this thing called the USA about 130 years ago, the cornerstone of our democracy was the right to vote in free elections, provided you were a white male. We've loosened up over the years, but still a huge chunk of Americans do not exercise this inalienable right to choose. In 2004, 64 percent of eligible voters made it out to the polls on Election Day, putting us at 139 on the list of countries that hold free elections, just ahead of Tanzania.

Your vote doesn't count: MYTH

Don't be ridiculous — your vote is quite literally counted. And while it's true that your one vote will not turn a red state blue, it is equally true that local elections are often decided by what amounts to a barroom full of people. And even presidential elections — the last two, anyway — were close enough that a few thousand votes would have made the difference.

Voting machines can be hacked: FACT

Yep, it's true, particularly the Diebold voting machines, which are in use in 20 North Carolina counties. It's pretty easy, actually. All you need to hack a Diebold Accuvote TS — and flip the outcome of an election — is a USB thumb drive, a Phillips-head screwdriver, some basic programming knowledge and a diabolical mind.

Ex-cons can't vote: MYTH

Unless you've been convicted of a felony, you can vote. And even if you have, you can still vote, so long as you don't live in Virginia or Kentucky.

Most states have provisions for ex-cons, allowing them to vote after their debt to society has been paid. In North Carolina, we allow convicted felons to vote upon completion of prison sentences, parole and probation.

You must register well in advance of the election: MYTH

True, voting used to be kind of a pain in the ass — which was by design, by the way. But these days, many states make it relatively painless to participate in the electoral process. In North Carolina, you may register to vote at the public library, in public schools, at the NC Division of Motor Vehicles or by mail up to 25 days before the election — there's still time. But if you miss the deadline date, the One Stop Voting program, initiated last year, allows voters to register and vote in one simple process between Oct. 16 and Nov 1. Check the state Board of elections website, www.sboe.state.nc.us, for more information.

You can't vote if you've been foreclosed: [???

This one is still up in the air. You do need a physical address in order to vote, and if your home has been foreclosed upon, you no longer live at that address. If you've moved to a different precinct and not updated your registration information, you may be vulnerable. Sen. Barack Obama is currently suing the state of Michigan to prevent the use of foreclosure lists to purge people from the voter rolls. Ohio is grappling with a similar problem.

Both are crucial swing states.

If you have an outstanding warrant, you will be arrested upon trying to vote: MYTH

Come on, dude. Unless you're public enemy No. 1, you will be able to vote without fear of being taken away in handcuffs. This applies equally to deadbeat dads, crooks on the lam and people with outstanding parking tickets.

If someone tells you this, he is lying.

You can't campaign within 100 feet of a polling place: FACT

It's true: If you want to talk to voters about your candidate just before they go in to vote, you must stand well away from the polling place — most have the line clearly marked. However, this does not apply to T-shirts, buttons or other candidate paraphernalia, which are not considered the tools of electioneering. You may wear your Sarah Palin T-shirt when you go in to vote; you just have to keep your mouth shut about it.

If you vote, you will get jury duty: FACT (sort of)

The short answer is that yes, when you register to vote your name goes into a pool where the names are selected for jury duty. But the fact is that your name can get on that list many different ways, including applying for a drivers license, buying a home and paying taxes, among other things. And you're eligible for jury duty whether you vote or not. Also, why the big problem with serving on a jury, anyway? It's your civic duty, you slacker.

Voting for a third-party candidate is a wasted vote: MYTH

Let's face it: Ralph Nader will never be the American president, and Ross Perot didn't have a prayer. But voting for a third-party candidate is not a wasted vote. These guys draw votes away from the more mainstream candidates and can have huge effects on elections. Ask George Bush or Bill Clinton — both of whom benefited from these third-party candidacies — if those votes were wasted. In another sense, a vote is an effective communication tool, and by voting for a third-party candidate you are sending the message that you think the other two are lousy.