Error Correction in Absentee Voting

Under current practices, absentee voters risk that their vote will not be counted because absentee ballots are not subject to the same error checking process used for ballots cast in person at the polls. Because they do not attend the polls, absentee voters do not have the opportunity to process their completed ballot through an optical scan tabulator. The tabulator provides notice to a voter who has over-voted a race, marked a vote in an invalid manner, or crossed parties on a primary ballot. Such errors are correctable for those who vote in person at the polling place, but cannot be corrected by the absentee ballot counting board or other election workers.

MERA proposes that absentee voters be provided the same opportunity as in-person voters for error detection and correction. We propose that each jurisdiction (or county in the case of areas with low numbers of voters) provide its absentee voters at a central location an optical scan tabulator set in "test mode" and placed on a table top surrounded by a privacy screen. Hours of operation would be the same as the clerk's office usually provides before an election. This would permit absentee voters to bring their completed ballots to the location, or obtain and vote an AV ballot in person, and then receive error feedback in privacy before sealing the ballot in the standard AV return envelope and submitting it to the clerk. Voters would continue to have the option to "spoil" an erroneous ballot and request a new one.

Jurisdictions that do not have an extra tabulator to use for AV error checking should be provided one by the Bureau of Elections. The additional machines could be drawn from the large inventory of mothballed tabulators created when Michigan used HAVA money to buy new machines and standardize tabulator brands by county. (Some minor upgrading may be needed for older machines.)

The very small costs of this approach to AV error checking are justified by the resulting increase in voter confidence. Such arrangements also provide the benefits of "early voting" without the drawbacks--severe security risks, daily burden of record-keeping, sealing, and storage, and added personnel costs--that would accompany the early use of tabulators in live election mode.