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BODY:

OHIO SECRETARY OF State Ken Blackwell officially certified yesterday that George Bush won Ohio by 119,000 votes, but the announcement did nothing to quell the mounting fury over voting problems there on Election Day.

An alliance of liberal groups vowed to challenge the certification in court, while the Green and Libertarian parties said they would file requests today for an immediate hand recount of the state's 5.5 million ballots.

Ohio was the decisive state in the election and none of the challenges is expected to prevent the Electoral College from making the President's reelection official. But the hand recount may be able to tell why nearly 93,000 voters who went to the polls did not register any vote for President.

Bush's final margin in Ohio was 20,000 votes fewer than unofficial returns reported on Election Night. His margin diminished after provisional and overseas absentee ballots were tallied.

Many Kerry supporters remain suspicious of the election results because of a series of voting irregularities. They include unexplained computer glitches, inflated vote counts and allegations that turnout in minority areas was suppressed.

The allegations have triggered a review of the vote by the U.S. General Accountability Office, and last week several Democratic congressmen, including New York's Rep. Jerrold Nadler, wrote Blackwell with a detailed list of complaints.

Among the complaints:

In Miami County, nearly 19,000 new votes were "inexplicably" added to the final tallies after all precincts reported their vote, according to Nadler.

In Franklin County, where the city of Columbus is located, 68 machines were never deployed on Election Day despite long lines for voters and despite the breakdown of 77 machines during the day. Several Ohio newspapers have reported that minority neighborhoods in Columbus had far fewer machines per voter than the suburbs of Columbus. Some voters in Franklin County reported waiting on line from two to seven hours.

In Warren County, a Republican stronghold, election officials locked down the county administration building on Election Night and barred reporters from observing the count. Officials claimed a terrorist threat sparked the lockdown, but the FBI later said it had no information of any threat.

In many cases, election workers did a terrible job of instructing voters on using provisional ballots. In the city of Cleveland, for example, nearly 40% of 9,349 provisional ballots were rejected as invalid. More than 1,000 were tossed for no other reason than that the voter deposited the ballot in the wrong precinct. Statewide, 20% of provisional ballots were rejected.
In Mahoning County, which includes the city of Youngstown, numerous voters claimed they voted for Kerry on a touchscreen voting machine but the machine registered a vote for Bush.

"I hate to be part of the conspiracy crowd, but it happened to me," said State Sen. Bob Hagan (D-Youngstown). Hagan said he then repeated his vote for Kerry, and this time his candidate's name lit up properly.

Daily News reporter Larry Cohler-Esses and I reported recently that Kerry apparently lost at least 700 votes in black neighborhoods of Cleveland when machines in 10 precincts registered an unusual number of votes for two little-known third party candidates.

Democratic leaders initially were astonished by those voting anomalies, but they have since conceded that the number of wrongly registered votes could be even more widespread.

The problem apparently was caused by poor training of city poll workers. In Ohio, the order of candidates on the ballot is rotated by precinct. When more than one precinct is located at the same polling place - and this occurs often in big cities - workers must be sure voters do not cast a ballot in the machine of the adjoining precinct. But with many polling places swamped by long lines this year, those safeguards apparently broke down.

It may be that all the problems in Ohio have a logical explanation. But after the fiasco in Florida four years ago, we shouldn't be taking any chances.

Something tells me no bank in America would accept as many computer problems in tracking its money as Ohio's elections board had in tracking its votes on Nov. 2.

"We can't afford to have people question the legitimacy of an election," Nadler said yesterday. jgonzalez@nydailynews.com

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