

1 of 100 DOCUMENTS

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In Columbus, and across the nation, voters' ranks swelled by newcomers

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BODY:

It was the bake-sale approach to voter registration: Roll out a card table, throw a plastic tablecloth over it and hope you snag some passers-by.

The sidewalk setup outside the Franklin County Board of Elections was a first yesterday, on the last day to register to vote in the Nov. 2 election.

"We did this because of the large volume," said Libbie Worley, manager of voter services. Not counting yesterday's additions, the county has registered 98,153 voters this year, said Worley, who was working the table outside the elections board's office, 280 E. Broad St.

Yesterday's drive increased the county total by at least 20,000, bringing the total of registered voters to about 837,000, elections board director Matt Damschroder said.

Surges were reported around Ohio and in more than a dozen other states where the registration deadline was yesterday.

In Cuyahoga County, home of heavily Democratic Cleveland, elections officials yesterday alone received nearly 20,000 voter-registration cards and, as of 2 p.m., had taken 15,000 phone calls, most from people wanting to confirm that they were registered.

"It's an amazing year and an amazing process," said Michael Vu, director of the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections.

The office has received 235,000 voter-registration cards this year, Vu said, estimating that of those about 100,000 were new voters. The balance were name and address changes and duplicates.

In Hamilton County, a Republican stronghold, new registrations totaled 64,045 as of Saturday. Board of elections members won't have an accurate count for days, said Diane Goldsmith, administrator of the registration department. The county recorded 25,893 new registrations in 2000.

In Dayton, nearly 7,000 new voter forms were submitted to the Montgomery County Board of Elections yesterday.

"It's been pretty exciting here," said Chris Heizer, elections board director.

In Ocean County, N.J., phones rang continuously at the elections board. The day for the office operator went like this: "Good morning, Board of Elections, please hold; Good morning, Board of Elections, please hold; Good morning, Board of Elections, this is Barbara, how can I help you?"

PEOPLE RUSH TO REGISTER ;In Columbus, and across the nation, voters'

Both Democrats and Republicans have poured resources into registering voters, spurred by the near-deadlock of the 2000 presidential race and polls that predict another tight election this year.

Not everything has gone smoothly.

Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell first ordered local elections officials to reject registration cards that weren't on heavy-stock paper, then backed off after a burst of criticism. In Florida, critics are questioning a state order that would-be voters who failed to check a box testifying to their citizenship be rejected. And a lawsuit in Wyoming contends that groups were illegally denied the right to register voters.

In Columbus yesterday, the consensus of the noontime registration crowd was that this is no ordinary election year.

Cherise Douglas, 27, said she hasn't voted since she turned 18.

"I just think it's a good time to vote to make some changes," said Douglas, who works for Motorists Insurance Group across the street.

Henry Townsend, 55, of Columbus, said he's been less than impressed with candidates in the past.

"I didn't vote in the last election because I didn't like the choices," he said. "I'm determined to vote this time around."

For Briana Cribeyer, 21, this November brings the first opportunity to pick a president.

"It's so important for young people in the 18-to-26 age group. We're the largest demographic that doesn't vote," said Cribeyer, who works for City Year, a community-service organization. "All of my friends are voting."

In Lawrence County, Ohio's most southern county and which has correctly picked the president in every election since 1968, 150 new voters registered yesterday.

"It's been heavy all day; most have just walked in," said Mary Wipert, director of the county board of elections.

In all, Wipert said, 3,598 new voters have registered this year. That's out of about 42,000 voters.

The Associated Press contributed to this story

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GRAPHIC: Photo, TOM DODGE DISPATCH/, Mike Ross, left, Nate Tolber and Anita Peek register at a table outside the, Franklin County Board of Elections. The board's Libbie Worley, right, was in, charge of the open-air operations.

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