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HEADLINE: For voters, officials, a season of anxiety;
Area election boards swamped, fear problems;
Election 2004

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BODY:

Anxious voters are jamming phone lines at election boards across Maryland, waiting in long lines for emergency absentee ballots and leaving officials worried that next week's bitterly contested presidential election could bring record crowds, lengthy waits and even hot tempers.

All of that - and Maryland isn't even a swing state.

"People have to understand. This is not McDonald's, and we are not competing to be faster," said Patricia Matsko, elections board director in Carroll County. "This is a little more involved and a lot more important."

A late burst of registrations has pushed the number of registered voters in the state past 3 million for the first time. Final figures were not available yesterday, but according to preliminary calculations, registrations are up more than 10 percent from the 2.7 million registered four years ago, when there was another hotly contested presidential election.

Maryland counties also reported huge increases in the number of absentee ballots requested by voters this year. Baltimore County sent out about 16,000 this year, more than twice as many as it does for most elections.

The message that every vote counts might finally be getting through, but it can be hard work making sure that every vote is cast.

Sidney Weinberg, 87, spends six months of the year in Baltimore, but his legal residence is in Margate, Fla., where he spends the colder months.

More than a month ago, he and his wife, Sylvia, sent away for their Florida absentee ballots. They haven't received them, however, and Broward County officials need to receive them by 7 p.m. Tuesday for them to count. 'Just impossible'

The Weinbergs couldn't get through to election officials by phone. "It's just impossible," he said.

Thousands of absentee ballots are missing in the county, the most Democratic county in Florida.

Weinberg was contacted yesterday by Democratic Party workers in Florida who have tracked down ballots for him and his wife. The ballots are to arrive by tomorrow, and the Weinbergs will then have to send them back by overnight mail to ensure that they arrive in time to be counted.

After the problems in Florida after the election four years ago, he hopes they do.

Frank Hammond, a Dundalk man who has been spending time in Maine building a retirement home, said it took him more than three weeks to receive his absentee ballot from Baltimore County. He faxed the request Oct. 4 and didn't

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receive his ballot until Tuesday. To make sure it arrives by the close of voting Tuesday, he returned it by certified mail with a return receipt.

'\$11 to vote'

"So far, it's cost me almost \$11 to vote for the person I wanted to vote for," he said.

"If I didn't have the \$11 to spend, I'd have lost out on my vote."

Concerns about the potential for legal problems and accusations of fraud on Election Day have prompted the Maryland U.S. attorney's office to put a lawyer on duty to answer calls from the public at 410-209-4800 or 443-677-9014. Lawyers have been commissioned by Republicans and Democrats to be on hand at polling sites in case of problems.

Questions have arisen elsewhere. In several battleground states, a consulting firm funded by the Republican National Committee has been accused of deceiving would-be voters and destroying Democratic voter-registration cards.

Many of the calls coming into the local elections offices are from voters who want to be sure that they are registered and to confirm the location of their polling places.

In Anne Arundel County in recent days, the phones lines have been busy all day, and Barbara Fisher, the county elections director, said she has been receiving 50 or 60 e-mails every couple of hours.

"We were not prepared for this kind of influx," she said.

Employees have been working extended hours seven days a week for more than a month, she said. Still, not every call is answered.

'Everyone ... exhausted'

"It's awful," she said. "Everyone in here's exhausted."

If voters aren't on the rolls when they arrive at their polling place Tuesday, they can cast provisional ballots that would be set aside. After the rest of the votes had been counted, workers would determine whether the voter was properly registered. If so, the vote would be counted.

Election workers have spent the past month processing huge numbers of new registrations. Prince George's County added 50,000 new voters between Sept. 1 and the Oct. 12 registration deadline.

In Montgomery County, 19,700 new registered voters were added in the first 12 days of this month, 3,000 of them on Oct 12. "We've been cranking," said Marjorie Rohr, an administrative specialist with the Montgomery County board of elections.

"It hasn't been surprising to me," said Howard County elections chief Betty L. Nordaas. "People seem so engaged in this particular election."

Officials throughout the area say that all voters who requested absentee ballots by the Oct. 26 deadline should receive their ballots within the next few days.

Requests for emergency absentee ballots, which voters can request until Election Day in cases of illness or other special circumstances, also have surged. Such ballots need to be returned, by mail or in person, by the close of voting Tuesday.

Competition for parking spaces among voters seeking emergency ballots has resulted in shouting matches in Anne Arundel County, said Fisher, the county elections director.

Officials are also preparing new electronic voting machines, which will get their biggest test and will be under added scrutiny because their reliability has been publicly criticized by computer experts.

Concern about lines

"We have had no problem with equipment, but I am concerned about lines at the polls," Carroll County's Matsko said. "We have enough judges in place, but people might be apprehensive using these machines for the first time."

In Allegany County, Catherine O. Davis has the same wish that all elections administrators have.

"We usually pray for large margins," said Davis, who has been on the job for 18 years, "but I don't think you're going to see it."

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Sun staff writers Lynn Anderson, Mark Bomster, Hanah Cho, Matthew Dolan, Lisa Goldberg, Mary Gail Hare and Liz F. Kay contributed to this article.

NOTES:

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S) / CHART(S), 1. BUSH Yesterday: President Bush addresses a campaign rally in Saginaw, Mich., at which spoke of how the Sept. 11 attacks shaped his presidency. Page 10A; Today: President Bush will visit Manchester and Portsmouth, N.H.; Toledo and Columbus, Ohio; and will stay overnight in Columbus.; 2. KERRY Yesterday: Democratic candidate John Kerry wears a Red Sox cap to celebrate the Boston team's World Series victory as he greets supporters in Toledo, Ohio. Page 10A; Today: Senator Kerry will visit Orlando, West Palm Beach and Miami, Fla.; and will stay overnight in Appleton, Wis.; 3. Voter registration; 1. TIM SLOAN : AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES; 2. JUSTIN SULLIVAN : GETTY IMAGES; 3. SUN STAFF

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