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Remember the chads: Dimpled, at top left; fully removed, at lower right.

I Have Chad News for You

By MICHAEL T. HEANEY

To my delight, I received my 2002 absentee ballot last week from the election board in Chicago. To my chagrin, I opened the envelope to discover a punch-card ballot similar to the one that brought the 2000 presidential election to its knees.

The enclosed materials included a specimen ballot, a ballot card, a return envelope and a small metal punching tool. I sat down at my desk and spent 20 minutes assiduously punching my way through the ballot's 92 questions. Although I pressed as firmly as possible, I discovered that only 57 holes were punched cleanly through and that the remainder included a substantial number and variety of—yes—hanging chads.

Anticipating a replay of the Florida fiasco, I invited an observer (actually, a colleague) to watch as I counted the remaining attempted votes: 11 chads attached by one corner, nine attached by two corners, five attached by three corners, nine firmly punched through but still hanging by four corners, and one genuinely dimpled. One chad (for the governor's race) fell off after I made this count. I was able to peel off most of the remaining chads easily, though I did need to re-punch the dimpled chad (which was for a judicial retention election that I must not have cared

strongly about).

My care in removing the chads was a direct result of my awareness of the fiasco in Florida. While I took extra time to inspect my absentee ballot closely and remove the extraneous bits of cardboard, it is easy to see how I might have behaved differently with scores of people waiting behind me on Election Day.

Why does the world's most advanced democracy employ some of the world's most obsolete election equipment? Punch-card ballots, and the chads they create, are still used by jurisdictions in 28 states. (In the 2000 election, 34.4 percent of all votes were cast by punch card, according to the National Commission on Election Reform.) Many other nations, such as Brazil, have moved to completely electronic elections. While some people complain that computer voting systems are confusing and difficult to use, such systems surely cannot be more difficult than these push-pins (which befuddle younger voters like myself no less than they puzzled the elderly who were at the center of the 2000 dispute in Florida).

The newly enacted Help America Vote Act of 2002 will ameliorate some of these problems, but questions remain as to how much of the \$3.9 billion authorized by the act will be appropriated. (Congress must do both for money to be spent.) In tough fiscal times such as these, Congress may wonder if it can afford the entire amount. My question: Can our democracy afford not to?

No one should have to vote on the kind of ballot I used last week.

Michael Heaney, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, is spending several months in Washington this fall while conducting research.