

Error and Fraud at Issue As Absentee Voting Rises

Problems With Ballots Could Affect Elections

By ADAM LIPTAK

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — On the morning of the primary here in August, the local elections board met to decide which absentee ballots to count. It was not an easy job.

The board tossed out some ballots because they arrived without the signature required on the outside of the return envelope. It rejected one that said "see inside" where the signature should have been. And it debated what to do with ballots in which the signature on the envelope did not quite match the one in the county's files.

"This 'r' is not like that 'r,'" Judge Augustus D. Aikens Jr. said, suggesting that a ballot should be rejected.

Ion Sancho, the elections supervisor here, disagreed. "This 'k' is like that 'k,'" he replied, and he persuaded his colleagues to count the vote.

Scenes like this will play out in many elections next month, because Florida and other states are swiftly moving from voting at a polling place toward voting by mail. In the last general election in Florida, in 2010, 23 percent of voters cast absentee ballots, up from 15 percent in the midterm election four years before. Nationwide, the use of absentee ballots and other forms of voting by mail has more than tripled since 1980

and now accounts for almost 20 percent of all votes.

Yet votes cast by mail are less likely to be counted, more likely to be compromised and more likely to be contested than those cast in a voting booth, statistics show. Election officials reject almost 2 percent of ballots cast by mail, double the rate for in-person voting.

"The more people you force to vote by mail," Mr. Sancho said, "the more invalid ballots you will generate."

Election experts say the challenges created by mailed ballots could well affect outcomes this fall and beyond. If the contests next month are close enough to be within what election lawyers call the margin of litigation, the grounds on which they will be fought will not be hanging chads but ballots cast away from the voting booth.

In 2008, 18 percent of the votes in the nine states likely to decide this year's presidential election were cast by mail. That number will almost certainly rise this year, and voters in two-thirds of the states have already begun casting absentee ballots. In four Western states, voting by mail is the exclusive or dominant way to cast a ballot.

The trend will probably re-

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SARAH BETH GLICKSTEIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

An absentee ballot in Florida. Almost 2 percent of mailed ballots are rejected, double the rate for in-person voting.



MANU BRABO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Denied more weapons like shoulder-fired missiles, Syrian rebels rely on rifles like this Kalashnikov, or AK. "You can't stop the Syrian regime's military with AKs," a state official in Qatar said.

Scant Oversight of Drug Maker in Fatal Outbreak

This article is by Denise Grady, Andrew Pollack and Sabrina Tavernise.

Eddie C. Lovelace, a Kentucky judge still on the bench into his late 70s, had a penchant for reciting Shakespeare from memory and telling funny stories in his big, booming voice. But a car accident last spring left him with severe neck pain, and in July and August he sought spinal injections with a steroid medicine for relief.

Instead, Judge Lovelace died in Nashville in September at age 78, one of the first victims in a growing national outbreak of meningitis caused by the very medicine that was supposed to help him. Health officials say they believe it was contaminated with a fungus.

The rising toll — 7 dead, 57 ill and thousands potentially exposed — has cast a harsh light on the loose regulations that legal

7 Meningitis Deaths From Treatment of Uncertain Value

experts say allowed a company to sell 17,676 vials of an unsafe drug to pain clinics in 23 states. Federal health officials said Friday that all patients injected with the steroid drug made by that company, the New England Compounding Center in Framingham, Mass., which has a troubled history, needed to be tracked down immediately and informed of the danger.

"This wasn't some obscure procedure being done in some obscure hospital," said Tom Carroll, a close friend to the Lovelace family, and their lawyer. "They had sought out a respected neurosurgeon who had been referred by their family doctor, at a re-

spected hospital," he said, referring to the St. Thomas Outpatient Neurosurgery Center. "How does this happen?"

The answer, at least in part, is that some doctors and clinics have turned away from major drug manufacturers and have taken their business to so-called compounding pharmacies, like New England Compounding, which mix up batches of drugs on their own, often for much lower prices than major manufacturers charge — and with little of the federal oversight of drug safety and quality that is routine for the big companies.

"The Food and Drug Administration has more regulatory authority over a drug factory in China than over a compounding pharmacy in Massachusetts," said Kevin Outterson, an associate professor of law at Boston University.

The outbreak has also brought

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CITING U.S. FEARS, ARAB ALLIES LIMIT SYRIAN REBEL AID

HEAVY ARMS WITHHELD

Terrorism Risk Curtails
Saudi and Qatari Bid
to Tip Civil War

By ROBERT F. WORTH

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — For months, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been funneling money and small arms to Syria's rebels but have refused to provide heavier weapons, like shoulder-fired missiles, that could allow opposition fighters to bring down government aircraft, take out armored vehicles and turn the war's tide.

While they have publicly called for arming the rebels, they have held back, officials in both countries said, in part because they have been discouraged by the United States, which fears the heavier weapons could end up in the hands of terrorists.

As a result, the rebels have just enough weapons to maintain a stalemate, the war grinds on and more jihadist militants join the fray every month.

"You can give the rebels AKs, but you can't stop the Syrian regime's military with AKs," said Khalid al-Attiyah, a state minister for foreign affairs in Qatar. Providing the rebels with heavier weapons "has to happen," he added. "But first we need the backing of the United States, and preferably the U.N."

Saudi officials here said the United States was not barring them from providing shoulder-fired missiles, but warning about the risks. The Saudis and Qataris said they hoped to convince their allies that those risks could be overcome. "We are looking at ways to put in place practices to prevent this type of weapon from falling into the wrong hands," one Arab official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity in line with diplomatic protocol.

American support for such weapons transfers is unlikely to materialize any time soon. The Obama administration has made clear that it has no desire to deepen its efforts, mostly providing lo-

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Bloomberg Pushes a Plan to Let Midtown Soar

By CHARLES V. BAGLI

London, Tokyo and other metropolises have created central business districts with forests of skyscrapers in recent years, seeking to meet the needs of globe-trotting corporate tenants.

But New York's premier district, the 70-block area around Grand Central Terminal, has lagged, Bloomberg officials say, hampered by zoning rules, decades old, that have limited the height of buildings.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg wants to overhaul these rules so that buildings in Midtown Manhattan can soar as high as those elsewhere. New towers could eventually cast shadows over landmarks across the area, including St. Patrick's Cathedral and the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. They could rise above the 59-story MetLife Building and even the 77-story Chrysler Building.

Mr. Bloomberg's proposal reflects his effort to put his stamp on the city well after his tenure ends in December 2013. Moving swiftly, he wants the City Council to adopt the new zoning, for what

is being called Midtown East, by October 2013, with the first permits for new buildings granted four years later.

His administration says that without the changes, the neighborhood around Grand Central will not retain its reputation as "the best business address in the world" because 300 of its roughly 400 buildings are more than 50



CHANG W. LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

MAKE ROOM, OLD-TIMER The skyline near the Chrysler Building may get more dense.

years old. These structures also lack the large column-free spaces, tall ceilings and environmental features now sought by corporate tenants.

The rezoning — from 39th Street to 57th Street on the East Side — would make it easier to demolish aging buildings in order to make way for state-of-the-art towers.

Without it, "the top Class A tenants who have been attracted to the area in the past would begin to look elsewhere for space," the administration says in its proposal.

The plan has stirred criticism from some urban planners, community boards and City Council members, who have contended that the mayor has acted hastily. They said they were concerned about the impact of taller towers in an already dense district where buildings, public spaces, streets, sidewalks and subways have long remained unchanged.

Mr. Bloomberg has encouraged high-rise development in industrial neighborhoods, including the Far West Side of Manhat-

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British Soil Is Battlefield Over Peat, for Bogs' Sake

By ELISABETH ROSENTHAL

DICKLEBURGH, England — For Britain's legion of gardeners, peat has long been as essential to gardening as beer is to the corner pub. So trowels flew after the British government — heeding environmental concerns — announced plans to gradually eliminate peat from all gardening products, setting off an intense battle over how to prioritize two of this country's defining passions: indulging the yard and protecting the planet.

While many gardeners regard the partially decomposed plant matter known as peat as an almost magical elixir, environmentalists say using it is problematic because it is scraped off the tops of centuries-old bogs, which are vital ecosystems that also serve as natural stores of carbon, just like rain forests.

The celebrity gardener Bob Flowerdew was shocked by the violent reaction when he said he would defy the government and continue to use peat to nurture finicky plants like azaleas. "The hate mail was quite frightening



ANDREW TESTA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The celebrity gardener Bob Flowerdew, in Dickleburgh, England, drew criticism for opposing the plan to phase out peat.

— in some circles I've become an outcast," said Mr. Flowerdew, a longtime panelist on the BBC's "Gardeners' Question Time" radio program, and a favorite speaker at women's clubs.

The debate between the gardening industry and environmen-

talists grew so acerbic that the government appointed an emergency peat task force after the phaseout plan was announced last year, which delivered a first report this summer. "What I've done is to try to unblock an im-

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NEXT STOP



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT By Geghard Monastery; statue of an Armenian hero; sculpture of an actor; Hakob Hakobyan paintings at the Modern Art Museum. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTYNA MIENKIEWICZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Armenia’s ‘Pink City,’ in the Shadow of Ararat

By RACHEL B. DOYLE

THE show was about to begin at a Soviet-era playhouse with olive-green seats, antique Caucasian rugs and a tiled ceiling, in Yerevan, the Armenian capital. I was with a man almost 50 years my senior who, while giving me a tour of an experimental art center in a former disco that morning, had asked if I would join him at the State Theater of the Young Spectator that night. Invitations like this are not uncommon in this country of 3.3 million, where tourists are still treated as guests to be invited home for coffee and sweets, or, as in this case, to be taken out to an avant-garde pantomime performance. As the play began, it quickly became clear that this was nothing like the pantomimes put on for children in the West. This was a thrilling interpretive dance performance about a third-century martyr, St. Ardalion, his death suggested by the ribbon looped around his wrists and ankles. Ardalion had been hired to perform in a play that mocked Christianity, but he was inspired to convert onstage, and died for it instead. The play aptly summed up Armenia, which is considered to be the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion, in A.D. 301, and which has persevered through the centuries despite being conquered by the Romans, the Persians, the Arabs, the Mongols, the Turks and, of course, the Soviets. It is a country that has not forgotten the Armenian genocide of the early 20th century, and whose national symbol, Mount Ararat, where many Christians believe Noah’s Ark landed, is now on the other side of the closed Turkish border. Yet the play was also very much a product of contemporary Yerevan, where ancient traditions are juxtaposed with a vibrant arts scene and where a newly renovated airport is not far from several stunning cathedrals that date back more than a thousand years. The creative energy is palpable: The city is filled with colorful stencils of famous writers spray-painted on buildings. A souvenir shop I wandered into had an abstract-painting gallery, Dalan Gallery, hidden away on the second floor, as well as five yellow and green parrots. The Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art took over a cavernous Soviet-era dance club after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and it now hosts about a dozen multimedia art exhibitions and festivals every year. The first thing I noticed about Yere-



Ara Alekyan’s “Spider” by Cinema Moscow in Yerevan, Armenia, which has ancient sites and a vibrant arts scene.

van, speeding from the airport in a taxi at dawn, was that it was by no means a grayish post-Communist city. Buildings combine classic Soviet architecture with the striking pink and orange volcanic tuff rock native to the country. “Russians call it the pink city,” said Mane Tonoyan, a tour guide. No personal connections had drawn me to this mountainous country. Brushes with the Armenian communities in Beirut and Istanbul had piqued my curiosity, but it was an urge to go somewhere that still felt like a secret, to explore a place most travelers knew little or nothing about, that led to my visit. Indeed, despite offering a multitude of impressive historic sites, including a much older version of Stonehenge, called Karahunj, Armenia is barely on the radar of tourists, who visit neighboring Turkey in droves. That means that the services and accommodations set up for visitors can be rudimentary, though sometimes that just adds to its charm. On one tour I went on, the van driver suddenly stopped to chat and buy fresh eggs from a woman on the side of the road. After another excursion, a family of four invited me in to their apartment and plied me with strong coffee and traditional grape and walnut candy. Armenia’s old monasteries and churches are perhaps its greatest cultural treasures and account for a num-



ber of Unesco World Heritage sites. One of the most intriguing monasteries is Geghard, a complex of churches and tombs carved into rocky cliffs 25 miles east of Yerevan, long known for housing the spear said to have pierced Christ on the cross. (The spear is now in a cathedral museum at Echmiadzin, west of Yerevan.) I visited Geghard on my second day in the country. As I wound my way under the arches of the 800-year-old church’s candlelit stone chambers, I heard chanting growing louder and louder. Soon, I came upon a crowd gathered in an inner sanctum, and saw a monk in a black hood and a golden cape singing in a rich baritone, his voice

echoing off the rock walls. I must have looked a bit puzzled because just then a teenager in a lavender dress held her smartphone out to me. Using an Armenian-to-English dictionary, she had typed in the word for “baptism.” As a young boy clad in white stepped forward, I edged out of the red-curtained room so as not to intrude. Outside in the square three musicians were playing the duduk, a traditional woodwind instrument made from the wood of an apricot tree; children were wandering about wearing crowns of flowers; sellers hawked white doves, to be set free after visitors made their wishes. On a platform off to the side, men in boots gutted a hanging lamb, its bright red blood spilling onto a stone; a woman in a head scarf told me they would give the meat to poor villagers. Save for the black-robed student monks texting on mobile phones nearby, the whole scene could have been a tableau from a thousand years ago. That evening I watched a Franco-Russian violinist named Fédor Roudine, the grand prix winner of the Aram Khachaturian International Competition, performing concertos in an elegant 1930s concert hall. My ticket cost just 2,000 dram (or \$5 at 400 dram to the dollar). When Mr. Roudine finished, two cannons on either side of the stage shot out bursts of glitter in red, blue and orange, the colors of the Armenian flag.

Like Mr. Khachaturian, the composer who was once denounced as “antipopular” and sent back to Armenia for “re-education,” the country’s artists often had to deal with government repression. The Soviets banned Sergei Parajanov, the legendary Armenian director, from making movies for 15 years after his critically acclaimed film, “The Color of Pomegranates,” was released in 1968. To fill the void, Mr. Parajanov began to make collage art. Hundreds of his unique assemblages are collected in the Museum of Sergei Parajanov, an oddball standout of Yerevan’s rich house museum scene. One room is devoted to works Mr. Parajanov created during his nearly five years in prison, like bottle-cap carvings that look like old coins. Despite the danger, Armenian intellectuals continued to test boundaries. During an era when “unofficial art” — anything besides Socialist Realism — was anathema to the Kremlin, and exhibitions of it were being bulldozed in Moscow, the authorities somehow allowed a modern art museum to open in Yerevan in 1972. “Even some artists didn’t believe it would open,” said Nune Avetisian, director of the Modern Art Museum of Yerevan. The city’s Modern Art Museum was the first state institution of its kind in the Soviet Union. It is still hard to fathom how it was permitted to display works like Hakob Hakobyan’s “In a City,” a 1979 painting that shows a crowd of headless men raising handless arms in a Soviet-style square. Perhaps the freedom the authorities allowed the museum was simply the result of the city’s geography: “It was so small and very far from the center in Moscow,” Ms. Avetisian said. On my last day in town I traveled south to the Khor Virap monastery, passing deep gorges and endlessly rolling hills that seemed to touch the clouds, red-roofed houses and purple wildflowers sprouting from cracks in jagged volcanic rock walls. The snow-capped peak of Mount Ararat was always in the distance. As I entered Khor Virap, where the main draw is a deep dungeon where Gregory the Illuminator, Armenia’s patron saint, was imprisoned in the third century, a young man brandished a large rooster at me, smiling mischievously. I had been keen to go to a country that still felt undiscovered, and while the rooster-seller might have guessed that the redheaded woman with a camera was not really in the market for a blood sacrifice, I appreciated the gesture. ■

Bites

SHANGHAI
Ultraviolet

The scene resembles a religious procession, not the opening salvo of a 22-course degustation menu. As images of candles flicker on the walls, a bell begins to toll and an angelic hymn fills the room. Ten servers wearing ball caps and blue aprons slowly enter from a side door, heads bowed reverently over the silver bowls in their hands. Then the mood suddenly changes. The opening strains of the AC/DC song “Hell’s Bells” rip through the room as the servers place the bowls before the 10 diners seated around the stark white table. Inside, a green disc meant to evoke a Communion wafer is suspended on a silver prong, illuminated by a green spotlight from above. The first course, a wasabi-flavored frozen apple



At Ultraviolet, video-screen walls and music produce different moods for a multisensory eating experience. PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT WRIGHT OF LIMELIGHT STUDIO

bite, is served. Such theatrics are all part of the show at Ultraviolet, an experimental new restaurant opened in Shanghai by the French chef Paul Pairet, whose aim is to deliver a multisensory eating experience that goes beyond the mere taste of the food. Served in a dining room that more closely resembles a movie theater, with 360-degree video screen walls, surround-sound speakers and high-tech overhead lighting, each dish is accompanied by a carefully choreographed set

of sounds, visuals and even scents, all intended to create a specific ambience to enhance the flavors of the meal. The goal is to break down the constraints of the typical restaurant and intensify the focus on the food, not distract from it, said Mr. Pairet, who is also the head chef of Mr & Mrs Bund, the acclaimed French restaurant in Shanghai. Speaking rapidly in sometimes imperfect English, he explained: “I really think that we never lose the focus of the dish. I would not even say that the dish-

es are better, but to a certain, the memory of the dish is stronger.” The four-hour meal is high on whimsy and imagination. Mr. Pairet’s play on fish and chips (a single, battered caperberry stuffed with anchovy paste and paired with a Scottish beer) emerges in a dreary storm with images of raindrops on the walls and the sounds of thunder, before a British flag is illuminated on the table and the Beatles’ “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da” begins to play. Diners are transported to the beach

for the steamed lobster course, surrounded by crashing waves, the cries of sea gulls and the scent of seawater from the steam of a pressure cooker the host of the dinner, Fabien Verdier, whisks around the room. With each meal priced at 2,000 renminbi per person (or \$314 at 6.35 renminbi to the dollar), the success of Ultraviolet ultimately depends on the quality of the food. Mr. Pairet has already received a glowing review from one noteworthy critic: Alain Ducasse. After his visit last year, the chef scrawled “C’est magnifique” on a wall reserved for comments from guests. Mr. Ducasse understood that Ultraviolet wasn’t trying to be “a restaurant of the future,” Mr. Pairet said. “What we are doing is really anchored in the restaurant just trying to bring the things a bit more relevantly around the food.” Ultraviolet, (86) 21-6142-5198, uvbypp.cc. Guests depart from Mr & Mrs Bund, 18 Zhongshan Dong Yi Lu, Shanghai. Reservations made online at uvbypp.cc/bookings. JUSTIN BERGMAN