Early voting sparks complaints

Voters have to put up with long queues and technical glitches.

GAINESVILLE (Florida): Early voting in the US presidential election is under way – and the complaints are pouring in.

The front page of the Orlando Sentinel, a prominent local daily, featured an agony aunt-style column with advice on problems ranging from queue jumpers to proxy voters.

One reader complained that a man had appeared on her doorstep and asked her to cast her ballot with him, saying he would hand it in to the election office to save her the trouble of going there herself. “Say no to strangers,” advised the newspaper’s columnist, quoting a senior election officer.

The main grouses, though, seemed to be about the wait of two to four hours in long queues outside polling stations, and glitches in vote-scanning equipment.

The large early turnout is leading to predictions that the election this year will see a third of voters cast their ballots ahead of the Nov 4 official poll date, and an unprecedented overall turnout.

However, along with expectations of a high voter turnout are problems over voter registration and warnings of similar chaos to that which followed the controversial 2000 election.

Voters whose registrations are challenged, or whose names are removed from the rolls, often have to cast provisional ballots, which are not immediately counted in some jurisdictions and are frequently rejected on technicalities.

This may lead to a bitter and protracted fight at the race to the White House is decided by a narrow margin, experts say.

Adding to such fears, the Republicans have launched a slew of lawsuits aimed at preventing such ballots from being cast.

The most high-profile one was an attempt to challenge as many as 200,000 of the 600,000 new registrations in the battleground state of Ohio, where registration data conflicted with other state records.

That challenge was blocked by the Supreme Court last week, but trouble is cropping up in many states.

In Alabama, scores of voters are being falsely labelled as convicted felons. Michigan must restore thousands of names it illegally removed from voter rolls over residency questions, a judge ruled this week.

Concerns have also grown about the stress the turnout will place on the election machinery on Nov 4.

This year’s election “has the potential to combine a record turnout with an insufficient number of poll workers and a voting system still in flux”, a report by the non-partisan Pew Research Group said.

Mr Doug Chapin, electionline.org director, warned that since 2000, “we’ve been replacing certain sections, patching and plugging others, but… we’re about to crank the pressure sky-high”.

It was in Florida in 2000 that the “hanging chads” controversy – sparked by a partial failure of the machinery meant to indicate on a voter’s ballot who he had backed – required Supreme Court intervention before Mr George W. Bush was declared the winner by 537 votes.

That led to an overhaul of the nation’s voting system, and the state will be in the spotlight again this year — already, in South Florida, glitches have arisen in optical scan machines.

Given such a background the Democrats are taking no chances, and are urging an early march to the polling stations.

In a rally in Florida’s university town of Gainesville on Wednesday, Mrs Michelle Obama tried to ease the 10,000-strong crowd to vote early so they could spend election day helping others to get to the booths.

EXCEPTING TO BE SWAMPED

“We saw steady voting all through the day and at times the queues stretched around several blocks. Just before the rally, the torrent turned to a trickle, but now we expect to be swamped.”

Election officer Steven Johns, following a call by Mr Barack Obama’s wife, Michelle, at a rally for people to vote early so they can help others get to the polling booths on Nov 4.