The Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: Mechanization and Political Reforms

Additional developments of the late nineteenth century need elaboration. For one, mechanization would be applied to voting. Second, professional specialization would flower, and this trend would ultimately affect election administration. Third, electricity would be harnessed as a utility, allowing for the development and wide use of devices employing it, such as punch-card-based data processors. In the early twentieth century, additional changes in the voting process would occur, some in response to the corruption of the preceding era.

4.1 Glass Ballot Boxes and Ballot Boxes that Count

Before the voting machine was invented, there were devices developed to store and later to count paper ballots. In earlier times, containers for collecting ballots were casually selected; inverted hats were a typical receptacle. In 1828, in a precinct in Tennessee, a large gourd was used. As elections became more formal and participants were concerned about ballot frauds, the need arose for a more intentional and secure repository. Solid wooden boxes with a hinged lid were used in many cases. The lid of a typical ballot box had a slot or a circular hole allowing entry of ballots, and the lid might have been locked so that two keys, held by representatives of two different factions or parties, were required to open it. A description of a required ballot box was included in a law of 1790 in New Jersey, applying to five counties in which voting by ballot was carried out (McCormick, 1953, p. 92).

Persons intent on fraud applied ingenuity in efforts to circumvent the system. One such example was presented in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper of July 19, 1856 in an article entitled “Stuffer’s Ballot-Box.” The box that was used, according to the text, “in San Francisco and probably some of our northern cities,” had a false bottom just inside the outside panels. Extra ballots already filled out for the favored candidate(s) could be secreted between the inside of the external bottom and the false bottom.
The extra ballots would be released at an appropriate time. This particular fraud would depend for its success on a lack of documentation of the number of voters who came into the polling station to vote; in the nineteenth century, that was a common practice.

Glass started to be used in the construction of some ballot boxes by the time of the Civil War. The purpose was for officials and watchers to be sure the box was empty when polls were opened and to spot the entry of multiple ballots by a single individual. One such box is shown in figure 4.1. Keys to the locks could be held by representatives of competing parties. An example of this type was patented by Alvin Ringo and Amos Pettibone in 1884.

Counting the ballots as well as preventing the entry of multiple ballots was the purpose of a number of ballot-box inventions (see figure 4.2). The issue

Figure 4.1 Glass ballot box, ca. 1880s.