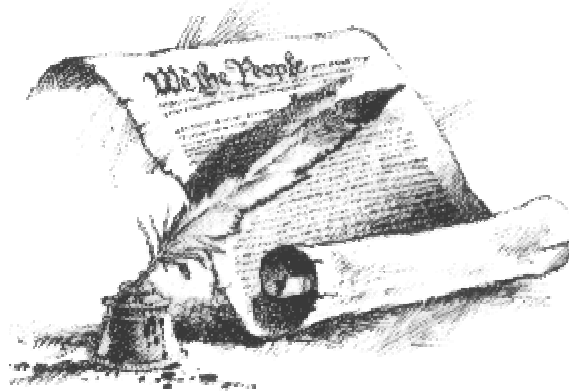Prior to the 1888 election of Grover Cleveland, there were no standard government-issued ballots. Some voters would bring their own ballots to the polls, but most used ballots printed and handed out by political parties. While having the government take responsibility for this aspect of elections makes sense to us now as a way to ensure fair elections, it was a novel idea at the time. We need to remember this when we look at reforms for our current system such as having the government take greater responsibility for voter registration.

The Party Ticket

Voter Privacy. While some voters wrote out their own ballots, most voters used ballots handed out by the political parties. In many precincts, the parties would print their ballot on colored paper observers could determine who had voted for which party. A number of these precincts even mandated that ballot boxes be transparent, making it even easier to observe who was voting for which party.

Voting the Straight Ticket. Another problem was that it was very difficult to vote a split ticket. Since the parties designed most of the ballots, they would list only their own candidate for each office. If a voter wanted to break from the party on a candidate, he would have to cross out the name of the listed candidate and write in his own preference. However, the parties rarely even left space to write in another name. In this case, a voter would have to paste his candidate's name over the name of the party's candidate.

Voter Fraud. Voters bringing their own ballots to the polls increased the danger of voter fraud. It was possible for a voter to slip extra ballots inside his official folded up ballot, enabling him to vote multiple times. In addition, ballot counters were likely to assume that colored party ballots were straight ticket without looking carefully for write-in candidates.

Enter the Australian Ballot

The Australian Ballot. In 1858, a new ballot idea was being implemented in Victoria, Australia. Rather than have voters bringing their own ballots to the polls, they used government printed ballots distributed at the polling station, one per voter.

Benefits of the New Ballots. The ballots were identical, so poll workers couldn't observe the color of the ballot and tell how someone had voted. Since each voter received only one ballot, poll workers did not need to watch to make sure they each only cast one. The new system made great progress at insuring voter privacy. Furthermore, the new design had all candidates listed together on one ballot, so it was no longer unnecessarily difficult to cast split ballots.

The New Ballot Comes to the U.S. This new system rapidly gained in popularity. The United Kingdom began using the secret ballot, also known as the Australian ballot, in the 1870s. The United States joined the bandwagon in 1888 when New York and Massachusetts each adopted the Australian ballot.

Looking Back on the Change. Now that we have become used to the secret ballot system, the old party ticket system seems counterintuitive. But in the 19th century many Americans thought that the party ticket system was best because it theoretically left everything in the hands of the voter. They felt that voters should be capable of getting a hold of or writing up a ballot on their own and that the government should not have to pay to print ballots. Despite its flaws, this system seemed to make sense until it was replaced with something better.

Relating This to Today. Parallels can be drawn between this historical situation and the current issue of voter registration. The responsibility for voter registration is left entirely to individual citizens and voter registration organizations, many of them partisan. This system has resulted in low voter registration and turnout and incomplete and inaccurate voter rolls. Having the government take
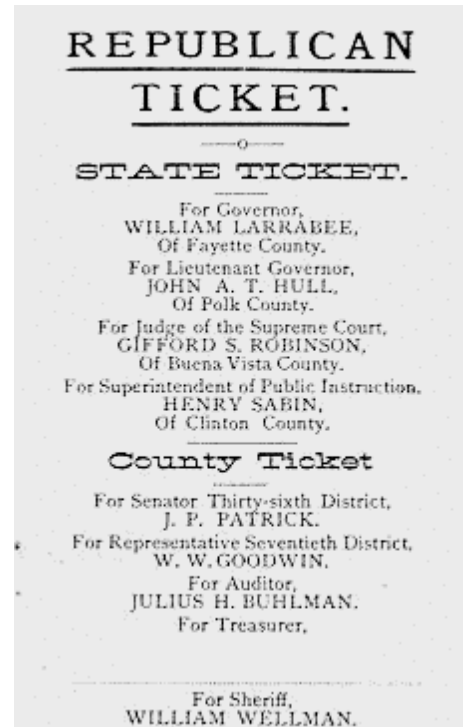
responsibility for voter registration would lead to more citizens being registered and less duplications and omissions in the voter rolls. Although it would mean a different way of doing things, even a small amount of government responsibility in the voter registration process has the potential to improve our electoral system greatly. Perhaps 150 years from now historians will be looking back at our current voter registration system and find it as amusing as we find the old "party ticket" system.

Make it Happen!

- Ask city council members, school board members or university administrators to support automatic voter registration programs at the local level.

- Create a student organization to support automatic voter registration for students.

- Write a letter to the editor of your local paper voicing support for electoral reforms.

- Visit www.fairvote.org for pending legislation in your area. Help FairVote by alerting us to developments in your community.

An example of a party ticket. There is not a lot of space for a voter to make any changes.