

# Voter's Block

## The Rocky Road to the Polls

By CHERYL ALKON

**A**LL I wanted to do was vote. I managed to cast a ballot on Tuesday at my local polling place in Riverdale in the Bronx. But after trying to register for seven weeks, I was apprehensive about what would happen when I showed up on Election Day.

The runaround I endured made me think that the concept of voter apathy is partly a myth. Some voters, I think, become exhausted by their quest to find the correct information.

I moved to the city from Massachusetts in 1997 but only this September did I fill out the change of address paperwork for voter registration at a street fair in Greenwich Village. When October came and went and I still didn't know where to show up on Election Day, I called the State Board of Elections. There I learned that my paperwork had never reached the appropriate place, and was told repeatedly that since I wasn't in the system, I couldn't vote as a New Yorker. While the date varies from state to state, the New York registration deadline this year was Oct. 17.

Further calls to the state election board weren't fruitful. On my first try, one man simply repeated everything back to me as I said it. My name was Cheryl Alkon? "CHERYL, ALKON," he'd bleat. My address? Date of birth? Tuneless repetition. Finally, he told me something I didn't already know: I wasn't on the registered voter list. Could I register over the phone? Fax? E-mail? Apparently not: I had missed the deadline. The repeater crowed that there was no Alkon registered to vote from my street address. "Alvarado, Alberts.

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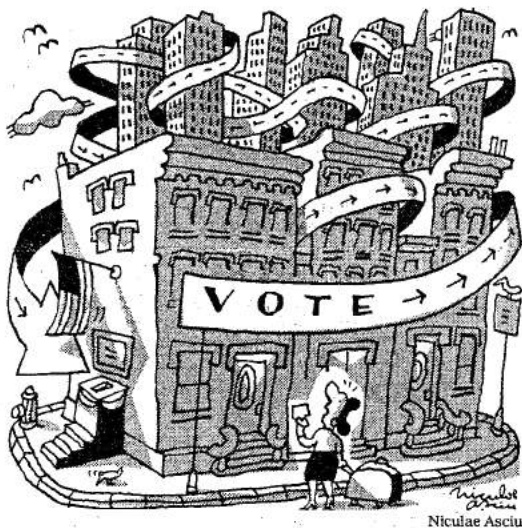
They're all there," he said. "But no Alkon."

I tried a different tack: absentee ballot.

At the Massachusetts Board of Elections, I reached another male voice. It was less strident but no more encouraging.

"When did you move out of state?" he asked.

"About four years ago," I replied. Bad answer. On an absentee ballot for former Massachusetts residents, I learned, you must swear to your identity and to the fact that you have moved out of state within the past six months. Signing the ballot would be



committing perjury.

"That's not a felony, is it?" I mused. What kind of penalty could that carry?

The Massachusetts voice wouldn't answer. He couldn't encourage me to break the law, he said.

I didn't want that, either. So why did it have to be this hard? I'm an American citizen, have been registered since 1988, and I am not a felon. I'm neither a political zealot nor apathetic. I hadn't missed the deadline: the fair was in September.

When I tracked down the association that runs street fairs, I came up

with nothing. Some local Republican organization set up on University Place and Eighth Street had taken my application, but if I didn't have its name, another voice told me, the group couldn't be located in the computer. I didn't remember the name.

As a trained reporter, I was sure I would find some crack in the wall of no. But what about those who don't know where to call?

A call to another state office yielded good advice: go local. So then I called the Bronx Board of Elections, and the woman who answered put the phone down to begin another computer search. I overheard some verbal abuse from two women in the background:

"You better stay away from me! I don't accept your apology!"

"Who would go near you anyway?"

"Just stay away! Do you hear me?"

The sniping was mercifully brief. Were the election workers so busy bickering that they couldn't help me vote?

Then, an answer. "You can vote," a blessed Bronx voice told me. "You can vote under an affidavit ballot."

That was news to me, but shouldn't have been to everyone else I talked to. Affidavit ballots let you vote with paper and pen. After the election, the ballot is checked with Board

of Elections records and counted if the voter is eligible. So why hadn't anyone in the first few calls been able to mention this process?

I waited for the sun to come up on Tuesday, whisked to the polls and easily found the right district table for my address. My name was still not in the record book, but I managed to cast my affidavit in less than 15 minutes. That night, I instantly checked the returns as they came in online. And each day last week, I followed the ballot recounts over the Web. If only the journey to get to this point had been as quick.