Election Day starts with long lines
Bush, Kerry show up in Ohio to make final pitch in key state

A voter emerges after casting his ballot Tuesday morning in Lee Township, Iowa.

MSNBC staff and news service reports
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Long lines formed at polling stations across the country Tuesday as Americans voted in the first presidential election since the United States plunged into its war on terrorism.

Both President Bush and Sen. John Kerry visited Ohio on
Tuesday for one last appearance in the battleground state.

Bush arrived in Columbus, Ohio, on Air Force One for an event thanking volunteers and to help out at a get-out-the-vote phone bank. He even made a few phone calls himself, telling one doubter: “I promise you, it’s me.”

The president had spent the night at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, and voted there Tuesday morning along with first lady Laura Bush and twin daughters Barbara and Jenna.

“This election is in the hands of the people, and I feel very comfortable about that,” Bush said after he voted. “Now’s the time for the people to express their will.”

Kerry, for his part, told cheering supporters shortly after midnight at an airport hangar in Toledo, Ohio, that “today is decision day. You have an opportunity now, this day, to make fundamental change in America, and the hopes of our country are on the line.”

Kerry also made another appearance in Wisconsin before flying back to Boston to vote and to grant interviews to several dozen TV stations across the country.

Overnight, the Bush campaign sent an e-mail from the president exhorting people to vote — “It comes down to today” — and asking that the recipient forward the e-mail to five more people. Kerry e-mailed a similar call to arms on Monday: “When you go to the polls bring your friends, your family, your neighbors. No one can afford to stand on the sidelines or sit this one out.”

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**Lines form before polls open**

By all signs, voters were engaged. Long lines were reported at
precincts from Florida and North Carolina to West Virginia and Michigan, some starting well before polls opened.

Rain was falling in parts of the Midwest as voters lined up. Brain Fravel, a 43-year-old welder who lives in Columbus, Ohio, said he had never before had to wait to vote. When he arrived at the Northland Church of Christ at 7:30 a.m. EST, he found a long line of people and waited 45 minutes to cast a ballot. “I thought I was early enough to beat it,” Fravel said.

At one polling place in a Virginia suburb of Washington, D.C. — where there was no hotly contested local race to spur interest — nearly 100 people were in line when the polls opened at 6 a.m. One voter said that was the largest turnout she had seen in 20 years of voting at the location.

“Every election’s important ... but my very survival is an issue, and that never was,” said Margie Miller, 55, of Baldwin, N.Y. Her husband Joel died at his 97th-floor desk at the World Trade Center in the Sept. 11 attacks. “All I care about is safety, safety, safety.”

By election eve, millions of Americans had voted early in 32 states, including more than 1.8 million in Florida alone.

The final pre-election polls turned up tied — 49-49 in one survey by CNN, USA Today and Gallup, with Ralph Nader at 1 percent. Tight surveys in Florida and a variety of
Midwestern states including Ohio deepened the mystery over who would collect the necessary 270 electoral votes.

“In all honesty, I don’t think it’s possible to predict what’s going to happen,” Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards said Tuesday on NBC’s “Today” show. “I think we’re going to see unprecedented turnout, I think we’re going to see huge voter participation. And when that happens, democracy works. So we feel very confident, very optimistic.”

Armies of lawyers monitor voting
Yet the prospect of unprecedented legal challenges hung over Election Day, with each side sending thousands of lawyers into motion to monitor the flood of newly registered voters and mount hair-trigger challenges against any sign of irregularity. Only a few minor problems were reported early on in several areas.

In an 11th hour blow for Democrats in battleground Ohio, an appeals court in Cincinnati stayed lower court decisions and cleared the way for vote challengers to be present at polling places in the state Tuesday. Democrats had claimed Republicans were seeking to discourage minority voters by keeping party representatives out of polling stations.

The decisions were quickly appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, where Justice John Paul Stevens declined to overturn the appeals court action in an order issued little more than hour before the polls there opened.

In addition to deciding the presidency, voters in 34 states were choosing a senator for a six-year term, with 19 Democratic seats and 15 Republican seats at stake. Currently, Republicans have the majority, 51-48, with one Democratic-leaning independent.
All 435 seats in the House of Representatives, where Republicans hold a 227-205 edge over the Republicans, with one Democratic-leaning independent and two vacancies in Republican-held seats, also were up for election.

**Figuring out turnout**

With the polls so tight, the biggest imponderable was turnout.

Curtis Gans, director of the nonpartisan Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, estimated that as many as 117.5 million to 121 million voters would cast ballots, 58 percent to 60 percent of those eligible. About 105 million Americans voted in 2000.

A strong majority in a Pew Research Center survey — 84 percent — said this election was especially important, compared with only 67 percent in 2000 and 61 percent in 1996.

As in 2000, the presidential spotlight on Tuesday will be on Florida along with the new showdown state of Ohio, both won narrowly by Bush four years ago and the biggest remaining toss-up states.

Kerry must win at least one of the two states to have a realistic shot at victory, while a Bush loss in Florida would leave him in danger unless he takes Pennsylvania or some Midwestern states like Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa — all won by Democrat Al Gore in 2000.

*The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.*
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