



Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

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The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States
The White House
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Dear Mr. President:

We are writing once again to express our alarm over the continuing failure of Congress and your administration to enact strong, meaningful election reform legislation. Our concerns have only been heightened by the recent problems observed in the primary elections of September 10, in Florida and throughout the country.

Election reform is the first true civil rights legislation of the 21st Century. Its enactment is of the utmost importance to each of our organizations as well as to the entire American voting public. We seek to enlist your help in urging Congress to reach an agreement on legislation that will deal with the extensive problems that continue to plague our nation's electoral systems, but which will not contain discriminatory provisions that could disenfranchise minority, elderly, student, poor and disabled voters. Specifically, the legislation must protect existing voting rights laws, provide strong national standards, remove discriminatory identification provisions, including the use of Social Security numbers, and ensure strong enforcement.

While much has been made of the recently enacted electoral reform legislation in Florida and several other states where substantial investments in voting technology were made, it was clear on primary day that serious problems remain. In Florida, major problems with machinery, provisional voting, precincts opening late and closing early, and voter registration lists caused many voters to be turned away from the polls, unable to cast their ballots. Likewise, in Robeson County, North Carolina, dozens of voters were reportedly turned away at the polls, and problems with tabulation machines required the ballots from three-quarters of the county's precincts to be counted by hand. Anecdotal evidence from around the country points to similar problems.

It is also clear that most states have not yet even attempted to make significant reforms. According to a recent report by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization, only five of fifty governors nationwide have signed meaningful election reform legislation into law. The majority of states, on the other hand, have

(*Deceased)

"Equality In a Free, Plural, Democratic Society"



been waiting for leadership to emerge at the federal level before they themselves make more comprehensive improvements. Unfortunately, Congress has yet to provide this leadership.

While both the House and the Senate have passed sweeping election reform legislation, it is currently being stalled in a joint House-Senate conference committee. Some House leaders are seeking to include several provisions in the final version of the bill that would move the cause of electoral reform backward rather than forward.

In particular, they are demanding to retain inviolate a provision from the Senate bill that would require first-time voters who register by mail to provide specific identification at the polls. This provision, as written, promises to add substantially to confusion at the polls in the 2004 presidential election and would have a discriminatory impact on large numbers of voters, especially people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, students and the poor. Many alternatives have been offered that would both reduce the discriminatory impact and provide for orderly transition, but these have been repeatedly rejected by Republican conferees.

Additionally, there are efforts to include language harmful to the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), which was in the House-passed bill but which the Senate rejected. This language would remove vital NVRA safeguards that protect eligible voters from being purged from voter lists simply for not voting and that ensure the voter's ability to correct erroneous purging.

Efforts have also been made to undermine the strong national uniform standards that are critical to preventing many of the problems that were witnessed in the Florida 2002 primary as well as the 2000 general election. These standards are essential to any meaningful election reform so that each state implements fair and uniform standards for all its voters.

Furthermore, attempts have been made to use Social Security numbers for both registration and verification purposes. This would have a discriminatory impact on many voters, including Latinos, Asian Americans, women and homeless people, and the use of Social Security numbers raises serious privacy concerns as well.

Finally, strong enforcement, by the Department of Justice and others, must be included in the bill. Enforcement is the only guarantee that as states take the many steps necessary to change their electoral systems they do so in compliance with this federal law as well as existing voting rights laws.

Reform of our nation's electoral systems is critical. But we simply do not believe it should be done in a manner that prevents legitimate voters from exercising their right to be heard on election day. Neither should it be done in a manner that increases the risks of confusion in the 2004 presidential elections. We ask that you urge the congressional leadership to drop its insistence on deleterious proposals and allow the election reform bill to move forward towards final passage.



As we approach the end of the 107th Congress, your leadership in advancing the cause of electoral reform is more critical now than ever. With your decision last month not to approve the \$400 million appropriated by Congress for election systems upgrades, and with another election less than two months away, we cannot afford to wait any longer for legislation that will protect the most fundamental right of a citizen in a democracy – the right to vote and to have that vote counted. We ask you to join us by voicing your strong support for legislation that will achieve these vital goals.

Sincerely,

Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

AARP

Alliance for Retired Americans

American Civil Liberties Union

Americans for Democratic Action

Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now

General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church

Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law

League of Women Voters of the United States

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund

National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees

National Asian Pacific [American Legal Consortium](#)

National Coalition for the Homeless

National Council of La Raza

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty

National Mental Health Association

Organization of Chinese Americans

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People For the American Way

Public Citizen

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United Cerebral Palsy

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cc: Andrew H. Card, Jr., Chief of Staff
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