

Senator Christopher J. Dodd  
Hearing on Election Reform  
Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation  
United States Senate  
March 7, 2001

Mr. Chairman, Senator Hollings, Members of the Committee: I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss an issue that is of vital importance to the continued health of this democracy -- the integrity of our election system and the need for election reform.

Last month, the Senate Democratic Leader, Tom Daschle, asked me to lead a working group in our caucus on this same issue to both deepen our understanding of and develop solutions to the problems that came to light during the election of 2000.

What we have learned already is that this is not a Democratic or Republican problem. It is an American problem. And I submit to you that the solutions to these problems must be, appropriately, nonpartisan to succeed.

The Senate Rules Committee, on which I serve as ranking member, will begin a series of hearings on election reform next week.

As the committee with jurisdiction over federal elections, there are a number of members of our committee and the Senate who have introduced or cosponsored thoughtful election reform legislation, and we will hear from those members, and others, next Thursday. I am hopeful that we will act to report one or more bills to the Senate for consideration.

We all know that there is a great deal of work to be done in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress -- on issues like social security, prescription medicines, education, housing, and jobs.

But I submit to you that none of these issues -- none of them -- is more vital than the issue of ensuring that each and every qualified American can freely and effectively exercise his or her right to vote.

Why do I say that? Because the right to vote is the cornerstone right in a democracy. In the words of Thomas Paine, it is "the primary right by which other rights are protected."

The struggle to secure that right for all Americans has been long and painful. Our nation's history of disenfranchisement is lamentable.

Thirty-six years ago next week, on March 15, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson convened a joint session of Congress to call for passage of what ultimately became the Voting Rights Act.

He spoke plainly and forcefully that evening. "All Americans," he said, "must have the right to vote. And we are going to give them that right. All Americans must have the privileges of citizenship regardless of race. And they are going to have those privileges of citizenship regardless of race."

Yet the sad message of this last election is that the privileges of citizenship have yet to be fully guaranteed to all Americans regardless of race.

In the days immediately following last November the 7<sup>th</sup>, I read a news article about a young woman. She left her home early on election day morning to cast her vote for the very first time. She was joined by her mother and father.

She remarked at the excitement and pride she felt that she could join her parents to exercise this most sacred right.

The woman and her family had planned to vote and then share a quiet celebration. But they never had the chance. When she arrived at her polling place, this young woman -- who happened to be of African-American descent -- was told that her name was not listed among the rolls of registered voters.

She waited patiently -- first for minutes, then for hours -- as overworked and undertrained poll workers sought to verify that she was registered. But they never did. Told she would not be able to vote, the young woman left the polling place in tears.

I respectfully suggest to my colleagues that the story of that young lady is a story we should all take to heart. She was crying on November the 7<sup>th</sup> not just for herself, but, I would suggest, for an election system that failed her -- and on some level failed the country.

If we do nothing else in this 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, it is my fervent hope that we see to it that neither this young woman nor anyone like her is ever again denied the right to vote.

In the next two weeks, the Senate will take up the issue of campaign finance reform. I commend the chairman for his diligent and sincere efforts to make such reform a reality. But I would suggest that such a measure is not an appropriate vehicle for debating election reform.

Many of us would like to see strong, fair legislation that limits the unhealthy influence of money in our electoral system. I, for one, am hopeful that such legislation will pass the Senate and House and be sent to the President's desk for his signature.

But if we learned anything last November, it is that not only money threatens to diminish and deny the voice of the average voter. Other forces are at work, as well, such as:

- C antiquated voting machines that fail to accurately record voters' choices;
- C ballots that confuse rather than clarify;
- C overcrowded polling places that require voters to have the patience of Job;
- C polling places that are inaccessible to the disabled, the blind and to language minorities;
- C inaccurate voter registration lists; and
- C so-called "ballot security" measures which have the effect, if not the intent, of intimidating and discouraging voters.

During the past several weeks, I have had the privilege of working with the ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee, Mr. Conyers, on legislation to address these and similar shortcomings of our electoral system.

Our bill is premised on the idea that the problems of the 2000 elections in Florida and elsewhere were not only technological in nature. This is not just about helping states and localities build -- or buy -- better mouse traps, if you will.

It is also about addressing -- with tough meaningful standards that apply throughout the country -- other issues where our electoral system is falling short:

- C in voter registration;
- C in the recruitment and training of poll workers;
- C in ensuring access for the disabled and limited-English speakers; and
- C in removing all barriers to voting, including disincentives to working Americans who often must choose between their job and exercising their right to vote.

Allow me to make one final point: we must do all we can to ensure that we have reform that is meaningful. We must not elevate form over substance. Nor can we rush to enact measures which address only the technology glitches in the last election. It is critically important that we work to enact the strongest set of reforms possible.

When it comes to ensuring the right to vote, we should not, and we must not, settle for second-best measures -- or else we risk eroding public confidence in our system of elections which threatens to undermine our system of democracy.

I thank you for the privilege of attending today's hearing. I look forward to working with you to achieve bipartisan election reform.