

Election 2000 put voting reform on the national agenda. The inability to ensure that all duly registered voters could vote and that all votes could be counted was unsettling to everyone. Such problems have direct implications for the legitimacy of our political system.

A flurry of activity followed the fiasco in Florida. Numerous studies were launched and commissions were formed; lawsuits were filed in a number of jurisdictions. Election reform measures have been introduced in legislatures across the country, most notably in Florida itself where legislators agreed to ban punch card machines, provide money for new voting machines, and establish uniform standards for vote recounts.

While it is too early to discern the ultimate impact of these and other reforms, it is easy enough to identify the fault lines separating different points of view. State officials, protective of their prerogative in electoral matters, desire federal financing with minimal federal oversight. While stopping short of imposing uniform standards, Congress will nonetheless be reluctant to appropriate funds without attaching some strings. On the partisan front, Democrats focus more on identifying and removing barriers to voting while Republicans raise concerns over voter fraud. These crosscutting currents have already prompted predictions that Election 2002 will be more like its predecessor than was originally hoped.

Years ago, Leslie Gelb wrote an article (and later co-authored a book) on the Vietnam War in which he argued that our involvement was not the result of a foreign policy breakdown but rather was a product of how the system worked. It is useful to think of Florida and Election 2000 in the same way. Election officials have long known about the kinds of problems that surfaced last year. The not-so-secret little fact about the way we conduct elections in this country is that we do not devote sufficient resources to the process to avoid the results that we saw recently. There are a host of reasons for this, some of which are related to the allocation of authority in our system of government and some of which bear the marks of partisan maneuvering for electoral advantage. In other words, the outcome of last year's election should be seen not as an aberration but as an expression of how our political system currently works. And that means that voting reform is only one topic in a wider debate that we should be having about political reform in general. There are discrete problems in our voting systems, such as antiquated and error-prone voting machinery, which can be remedied by improvements in the mechanics of how votes are cast and counted. But just as new technology is not the only change needed to improve how we vote, a conversation that just focuses on reforming our electoral system will not address all the areas in which reforms are needed.

This issue of the *National Civic Review* contributes to that wider discussion. Before the problems in Florida drew attention to the need for electoral reform, the campaign finance system was the principal focus of reform measures. A number of articles in this issue of the *Review* address the topic of campaign finance reform. Senate passage of the McCain-Feingold bill presages what would be the most significant advance on the federal level since the creation of the modern campaign finance system after Watergate in the mid-1970s. But there have been a number of developments at the state and local levels, ranging from Clean Money/Clean Election agreements to partial public financing systems, that go even further in restraining the potentially corrupting effects of campaign finance. This disparity between what has been accomplished to date at the federal versus the state and local levels supports an observation about contemporary politics and the prospects for political change. Reform efforts at the local level are needed to build momentum for political change at the national level.

The National Civic League is committed to this proposition and works in communities across the country to promote innovative political reform. Partisan conflict and stalemate at the federal level make reform efforts at the state and local levels all the more important. In various communities there is already a movement toward multisectoral, collaborative decision making in which all parties—the private sector, the public sector, nonprofit organizations, and citizen groups—come together to the table to solve problems. This emerging model of governance holds great promise for communities in tackling issues of local concern. But it is incumbent upon us all to find ways of connecting the energy we see at the local level to the national debate over priorities and policies.

We need to identify and ameliorate barriers to political participation at the same time that we develop new means for encouraging civic engagement at all levels. With generous assistance from the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and the Carnegie Corporation, the NCL's New Politics Program works to accomplish these goals. The reform proposals advanced here address a number of these important issues, and it is hoped that this issue of the *Review* will stimulate further discussion and activity. Electoral and political reform issues have attained a new salience following last year's election. This opportunity to make progress should not go unrealized.

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