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NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

7/10/03, New York City — An election policy expert today strongly criticized a plan to implement election reform measures in New York for failing “to provide the guidelines for improving elections that New Yorkers need and deserve.” Tova Andrea Wang, Senior Program Officer and Democracy Fellow at The Century Foundation, testified at a hearing in New York City about a New York State Task Force plan to comply with the Help America Vote Act. Wang testified that the task force’s plan provides almost no specifics as to how the state will repair our voting procedures. She said that in producing such a plan, “the task force has squandered the opportunity to show New York State how to move into the forefront of leadership” in reforming our broken down system of elections.

Congress passed the Help America Vote Act last year in response to the 2000 presidential election debacle. Under the law, every state must convene a task force to create a blueprint for how the state will carry out its mandates and use the money the law provides. “Implemented well, the law could mean an expansion of voting rights not seen since 1965,” Wang said. “Done poorly, greater disenfranchisement becomes a risk.”

Wang was the Project Director for The Century Foundation’s publication, “The Help America Vote Act: Impact and Potential for New York,” co-authored by former Attorney General Robert Abrams and elections expert Arthur Fried. Unlike the state task force’s plan, The Century Foundation report examines every provision of the federal legislation and details what specific action New York’s elected leaders and election administrators should take to best comply with the new law.

Wang testified that there is a wide range of major issues completely neglected by the task force’s report, including the following:

The Machines

- The plan refers to three DRE (ATM style) systems that have been certified by the State, without describing any of their features. The plan makes no recommendation with respect to the state’s requirement that all of the races be on one page – the “full face ballot” requirement” which imposes tremendous limitations on the state’s voting technology options.

Poll Workers

- The plan for improving poll worker training is vague. Commendably, a statewide curriculum will be made available, but there are no new requirements or standards for training suggested.
- There is no discussion of the need for language translators at the polls.
- The report is virtually silent on the critical issue of poll worker recruitment.

Voter Registration

- The plan states that the Board will seek access to other statewide databases for verifying voter registration identification. Given the new voter ID requirements, this is potentially a very useful tool in preventing inadvertent disenfranchisement. Yet the plan does not discuss what agencies it is referring to (other than DMV and the Social Security databases) or what voter information would be checked on those databases for the purposes of identifying the voter so that she is able to vote.

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- There is no discussion of what additional forms of ID the State will accept as fulfilling the new ID requirements of HAVA. The Century Foundation report recommends expanding the definition of identification to include documents other than those explicitly enumerated in HAVA.
- The plan does not define what will be included as a “mail-in registration” that is subject to the ID requirement. That is, it does not specify whether their definition will include registration applications delivered by hand to the Board of Elections by voter registration groups.

Voter Education

- Plans for voter education are extremely imprecise and fall short of what will be needed for successful elections next year.

Administrative Complaint Procedure

- There are few details as to how the administrative complaint procedure will work, including who exactly will administer parts of it, whether it will be made language accessible, and whether judicial review will be available.

Ms. Wang is available for further comment on the state’s plan for instituting voting reforms. For more information, contact Christy Hicks at (212) 452-7723 or hicks@tcf.org.

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