

The Century Foundation

formerly the Twentieth Century Fund

41 East 70th Street, New York, NY 10021

(212) 535-4441

NEWS

Contact: Christy Hicks

212/452-7723

hicks@tcf.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Series of Century Foundation Reports on 2001 Elections Shows That Election Reform Bill Will Solve Many, But Not All Election Day Problems

New Technology, Voter Education, Poll Worker Training, and State-Wide Registration Rolls Are Key Ingredients for Successful Elections

October 15, 2002, New York—After months of debate in a House-Senate conference committee, the House of Representatives has just passed the Help America Vote Act, legislation intended to address many of the problems exposed in the 2000 presidential election. The Senate is expected to vote and pass the measure in the next few days and the President is expected to sign it into law.

The Century Foundation has produced a new series of reports on state and local elections in 2001 that demonstrates that provisions in the bill could go a long way toward improving elections. However, the reports also point to the fact that a number of election day problems are not addressed in the new legislation. The reports were commissioned in order to assess the extent to which the problems evident in Florida and elsewhere in 2000 persisted in the absence of fundamental reform throughout most of the country. The reports looked at four important elections that took place in 2001: governor's races in New Jersey and Virginia, and mayoral races in New York City and Los Angeles.

Among other provisions, the federal bill requires every state to have provisional voting; has measures for keeping the number of votes lost in elections to a minimum; requires that voting systems have the capacity to allow the voter to check his or her vote, verify it, and change it if desired, before it is cast; and to have ballots available in languages other than English in jurisdictions where a significant part of the population speaks another language. Problems uncovered in The Century Foundation reports but not adequately addressed in the bill include de-centralized election systems, error rates that don't include voter errors, lack of well trained poll workers and language translators at the polls, and low rates of voter registration.

Overall, these reports show that election problems were much less pervasive in Virginia and Los Angeles—which have long-standing voting laws and practices that parallel the reforms that Congress will likely enact—than in New Jersey and New York City, where there have been more scattershot approaches to election reform. While new technology went a long way toward reducing voter error and uncounted ballots, the reports show that the machinery employed is not necessarily the most significant factor affecting the rate of spoiled ballots. Voter education, poll worker training, statewide election rolls, and systems to alleviate physical and language barriers to voting, were shown to be important keys to successful election results.

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Among the findings of the election reports:

- In a jurisdiction in Virginia in which the voting system was switched to one with technology that allowed voter verification and correction, the overvote count plummeted. The new procedures allow voters to discard overmarked ballots and vote on a new one. An election official in one jurisdiction reports that the unofficial results showed that overvotes dropped from 600-700 in the 2000 presidential election to one in the 2001 gubernatorial election.
- Los Angeles County and the City of Los Angeles provided sample ballots and election support to voters who speak English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. The county was challenged to provide bilingual poll workers to work in 22 percent of all precincts (18.5 percent in the City of Los Angeles). Their experience with providing multilingual assistance at the polls is instructive for communities across the country with rapidly changing demographics.
- In Los Angeles more than 100,000 provisional ballots were cast in the 2000 election. In the 2001 election the number cast was 15,000. In New York City, tens of thousands of voters have cast affidavit ballots in recent years. The bill would require all states and localities to provide opportunities for voters to cast provisional ballots.
- In New Jersey there were more uncounted votes in 2001 than 2000, even though the state replaced its punchcard ballot machines.
- New York City had more uncounted, unmarked and lost votes than did Florida — and the nation as a whole — in the 2000 election due to its use of antiquated lever machines. In 2001, New York City had a tremendous shortage of poll workers, voting machines, and language translators.

The 2001 election project is a follow-up to the work of the National Commission on Federal Election Reform, a project cosponsored by The Century Foundation and the University of Virginia's Miller Center and chaired by former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. The reports were written by Jon Gould, assistant professor of government and politics, visiting assistant professor of law, George Mason University (Virginia); Thad Hall, program officer, The Century Foundation (Los Angeles); Ronald Hayduk, professor, political science, the City University of New York Graduate School (New York City); Ingrid Reed, director, Eagleton New Jersey Project, Eagleton Institute, Rutgers University (New Jersey). For more information contact Christy Hicks at (212) 452-7723 or visit The Century Foundation website (www.tcf.org) and the Federal Election Reform Network website (www.reformelections.org).

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