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EDITORIAL - New Standards for Election

The 2004 election may not have an asterisk next to it the way the 2000 election does, but the mechanics of our democracy remained badly flawed. From untrustworthy electronic voting machines, to partisan secretaries of state, to outrageously long lines at the polls, the election system was far from what voters are entitled to.

It's patently obvious that presidential elections, at least, should be conducted under uniform rules. Voters in Alaska and Texas should not have different levels of protection when it comes to their right to cast a ballot and have it counted. It's ridiculous that citizens who vote in one place have to show picture ID while others do not, that a person who accidentally walks into the wrong polling place can cast a provisional ballot that will be counted in one state but thrown out in another. States may have the right to set their own standards for local elections, but picking the president is a national enterprise.

This is obviously a job for Congress, and it deserves the same kind of persistent, intense lobbying effort that reformers have given the issue of campaign finance. But improvements by the states may be easier to achieve, and will clearly help prod Congress by their good example. Advocates should push every level of government to be part of the solution:

1. A holiday for voting. It's wrong for working people to be forced to choose between standing in a long line to vote and being on time for work. Election Day should be a holiday, to underscore the significance of the event, to give all voters time to cast ballots and to free up more qualified people to serve as poll workers.
2. Early voting. In states that permit it, early voting encourages people to turn out by letting them vote at times that are convenient for them. And it gives election officials and outside groups more time to react to voting problems ranging from faulty voting machines to voter intimidation.
3. Improved electronic voting. For voters to trust electronic voting, there must be a voter-verified paper record of every vote cast, and mandatory recounts of a reasonable percentage of the votes. The computer code should be provided to election officials, and made public so it can be widely reviewed. There should be spot-checks of the software being used on Election Day, as there are of slot machines in Nevada, to ensure that the software in use matches what is on file with election officials.
4. Shorter lines at the polls. Forcing voters to wait five hours, as some did this year, is unreasonable, and it disenfranchises those who cannot afford the wait. There should be standards for the number of voting machines and poll workers per 100 voters, to ensure that waiting times are reasonable and uniform from precinct to precinct.
5. Impartial election administrators. Partisan secretaries of state routinely issued rulings this year that favored their parties and themselves. Decisions about who can vote and how votes will be counted should be made by officials who are not running for higher office or supporting any candidates. Voting machine manufacturers and their employees, and companies that handle ballots, should not endorse or contribute to political candidates.

6. Uniform and inclusive voter registration standards. Registration forms should be simplified, so no one is again disenfranchised for failing to check a superfluous box, as occurred this year in Florida, or for not using heavy enough paper, as occurred in Ohio. The rules should be geared to getting as many qualified voters as possible on the rolls.

7. Accurate and transparent voting roll purges. This year, Florida once again conducted a flawed and apparently partisan purge of its rolls, and went to court to try to keep it secret. There should be clear standards for how purges are done that are made public in advance. Names that are due to be removed should be published, and posted online, well in advance of Election Day.

8. Uniform and voter-friendly standards for counting provisional ballots. A large number of provisional ballots cast by registered voters were thrown out this year because they were handed in at the wrong precinct. There should be a uniform national rule that such ballots count.

9. Upgraded voting machines and improved ballot design. Incredibly, more than 70 percent of the Ohio vote was cast on the infamous punch card ballots, which produce chads and have a high error rate. States should shift to better machines, ideally optical scans, which combine the efficiency of computers and the reliability of a voter-verified paper record. Election officials should get professional help to design ballots that are intuitive and clear, and minimize voter error.

10. Fair and uniform voter ID rules. No voter should lose his right to vote because he is required to produce identification he does not have. ID requirements should allow for an expansive array of acceptable identification. The rules should be posted at every polling place, and poll workers should be carefully trained so no one is turned away, as happened repeatedly this year, for not having ID that was not legally required.

11. An end to minority vote suppression. Protections need to be put in place to prevent Election Day challengers from turning away qualified minority voters or slowing down voting in minority precincts. More must be done to stop the sort of dirty tricks that are aimed at minority voters every year, like fliers distributed in poor neighborhoods warning that people with outstanding traffic tickets are ineligible to vote. Laws barring former felons from voting, which disproportionately disenfranchise minorities, should be rescinded.

12. Improved absentee ballot procedures. Voters outside of their states, including military voters, have a right to receive absentee ballots in a timely fashion, which did not always happen this year. Absentee ballots should be widely available for downloading over the Internet. Voters should not be asked, as military voters were this year, to send their ballots by fax lines or e-mail, denying them a secret ballot.

This year's election, thankfully, did not end in the kind of breakdown we witnessed in 2000. But that was because of luck. There were many places in the country where, if the vote had been closer, scrutiny of the election process would have produced the same sort of consternation. In a closely divided political world, we cannot depend on a margin for error when it comes to counting votes. We have four years now to make things right.