

# Emerging Issues in Election Reform

The League's March 2005 forum (see *League Matters*, p. 16) highlighted a number of urgent priorities for policymakers, election officials and others. The ideal we aim for is to ensure that all eligible Americans who want to vote should be able to do so freely and efficiently—and with full confidence that their votes will be counted as they intended.

Right now, our nation is not close to reaching that goal—despite the important and continuing advances under the Help America Vote Act of 2002. What is needed is a closer look at the next steps that will bring our election system back to health.

Participants called attention to a number of improvements, which the League has refined to four key steps:

## Professionalization

Election administration is basic management. Poll workers and election officials around the country are dedicated, competent and committed. The problem is that they are not given the resources, the training or the equipment they need.

In order to professionalize this system, we need uniform standards, training to the standards, and accountability. We need to be clear what the jobs of all the different players should be, and how to make sure that everyone, from the volunteer poll worker to the chief election official, can contribute in a positive way. We cannot afford to continue situations where ambiguous responsibility means a lack of accountability.

Professionalization also means

rethinking how we recruit and train poll workers, especially because we now depend on an aging volunteer workforce. And, it means reimagining the polling place—today, we are working with a 19th century model, but imposing 21st century expectations upon it.

We need to “think outside the ballot box” and look at innovations such as the well-staffed, full-service “Vote Centers” in Larimer County, Colorado.

## A New Focus on Service

Another next step is to put the “service” back in “voter service.” How long would a fast food chain survive if its workers regularly allowed long lines to form without opening more registers or if employees didn't help customers who had questions or problems navigating the system?

This is how the American election system works today for far too many voters. We seem to have forgotten that government has a responsibility to help voters, that voting should not be an inconvenience for people, and that the voter—the customer—should come first.

This is a problem that starts long before Election Day. The American system of voter registration seems deliberately designed to exclude and inconvenience eligible voters. In 2004, we saw that states didn't even have uniform policies for accepting or rejecting registration applications, leading to confusion for voters and local officials alike.

## Research and Development

The United States needs to bring 21st century systems and technologies to the election process by launching a wide-ranging research and development effort engaging our nation's colleges and universities in this important cause.

The process of change in election management is ongoing, and continued research and development must be part of that process. The redesign of polling place operations to accommodate modern technology and the advent of computerized voter databases are both steps that would clearly benefit from additional research and development.

Compared to the equipment purchased 30 years ago, today's voting systems are much improved. Still, we are not yet at a point where the equipment fully meets all our goals. We need improvements in ballot design, in the interface between the voter and the machine, and in error rates. And we need to look at which systems hold the greatest promise, and which are nearing a technological dead end.

The League of Women Voters believes that voting technologies must be secure, accurate, recountable and accessible. The development of systems that fully meet these goals will come only through a much more serious R&D commitment, as well as clear performance standards.

## New Federal Resources and Commitment

America needs to get real about the resources required to run elections in a manner consistent with our democratic ideals. You get what you pay for and right now, we are paying the price for our miserly approach to election administration. It is a price measured in Americans' declining faith that the system will serve their interests fairly and efficiently.

We need continued, permanent federal funding, with associated oversight, to make the transition to a 21st century system that delivers efficiency, security, accessibility and fairness.

When John F. Kennedy challenged the nation to launch a human mission to the moon, he did not specify how it would happen. He set a goal and committed significant government funds. We, too, need an Apollo-like project to improve our election systems.

With democracy gaining hold in new places throughout the world, it is time to ensure that the American election system can be a model. The League of Women Voters thanks the forum participants for bringing these important issues to light.

