

Elections in the United States - 2001

Do not separate yourself from the community
(Pirke Avot 2:5)

The right to vote freely for the candidate of one's choice is of the essence of a democratic society and any restrictions on that right strike at the heart of representative government.
(Chief Justice Earl Warren 1964)

Issue

The United States 2000 presidential election revealed numerous flaws in the nation's election procedures, uncovered widespread problems of voting inequality and highlighted the abuse of the democratic process through unregulated campaign contributions from special interest groups and individuals.

Background

The recount process in Florida following the November 2000 election displayed for all to see the numerous deficiencies in the nation's electoral process. In its report the United States Commission on Civil Rights claimed that the Florida officials ignored the evidence that voters were having serious problems on Election Day, continuing "a pattern and practice of injustice, ineptitude , and inefficiency" that disenfranchised them. Voter complaints included the moving of polling sites without timely notice, the lack of translation assistance for Haitian voters, and the intimidation of black voters by state police roadblocks. The design of the election ballots, the voters' lack of familiarity with the voting process, and the absence of any uniform procedure for counting ballots were only some of the problems that Florida voters encountered.

Studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and California Institute of Technology showed that four to six million votes of the 100 million cast in November 2000 were not counted. The survey cited faulty voting equipment, confusing ballots, voter error , and problems at polling places, including long lines, short hours , and inconvenient locations. The study concluded that many of the mechanical and human problems experienced could be solved if counties eliminated punch cards and lever machines and bought more accurate and reliable equipment such as optical-scanners.

A Congressional study found that across the country the votes of poor people and members of minorities were more than three times as likely to go uncounted than the votes of more affluent people. In many cases this was attributed to the prevalence of outmoded and defective voting equipment in the poorer neighborhoods; results showed considerably fewer differences when modern technology was in use.

Following the 2000 election there has been a widespread call for federal, state , and local agencies to work together to restore confidence in the integrity and fairness of the nation's election process. This means that all those who wish to vote are able to do so and all votes that are valid are counted accordingly. Remedies may include the implementation of a uniform nationwide poll closing time, uniform performance standards for voting equipment and uniform standards for counting disputed ballots within individual states.

The Florida presidential election highlighted the confusion of the disenfranchisement laws and how they can be manipulated for political purposes, even against state and federal rulings. Florida is one of ten states that do not

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restore voting rights to their felons after they complete their prison terms, parole , and probation. Studies of the ex-felon population show that there is a disproportionate impact on the African-American population reflecting their disproportionate incarceration. Disenfranchisement laws are also not proportionate to the offense since they operate without regard to the type of crime or length of sentence.

During the 2000 election cycle the use of "soft money;" the huge unregulated contributions from corporations, unions , and individuals to political parties reached unprecedented levels with political parties raising more than \$457 million from special interests, double what was raised in 1996. The use of money to gain political access and favors threatens the American democratic system by favoring the rich at the expense of the poor and the immigrant. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have drafted legislation for a campaign finance system that allows elected representatives to put the public interest first by limiting "soft money," tightening regulations on advertisements and keeping caps on hard money donations.

Resolution

In recognition of Judaism's teaching that each one has the responsibility to play an active role in the community, Women of Reform Judaism calls on its United States affiliates to:

- 1) Educate their members to the flaws in the present electoral process and the remedies needed to restore confidence in the integrity and fairness in the system;
- 2) Advocate for legislation that will
 - Improve voter education, ensure compliance with voting rights laws, and reduce the error rates produced by voting machinery,
 - Ensure accessibility and convenience for all voters,
 - Provide clear standards for casting and counting votes,
 - Authorize funds so that state and local governments are financially able to modernize their election practices, and
 - Insure that valid absentee ballots from people overseas and those in the military are counted;
- 3) Sponsor nonpartisan voter registration and voter education drives;
- 4) Support the return of full voting rights to felons who have been released from incarceration;
- 5) Urge those members residing in states which currently disenfranchise ex-felons to advocate for repeal of these disenfranchise laws; and

Work for the passage of a campaign finance system that curbs the influence of money in the political system and places the public interest first.