

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this committee today to discuss the need for election reform. This issue is one which cuts across state and party lines, and it is very appropriate that it be given serious consideration at the federal level.

I have served as both a state and county election commissioner in Arkansas, and so I am well-acquainted with the challenges faced by election officials across the country. Arkansas has made great strides in the past few years, and 65% of the state's seventy-five counties now use optical scan machines, compared to the national average of 27%. Furthermore, only 9% of Arkansas counties still use punch card systems, compared to a national average of 36%. Unfortunately, as evidenced by the recent presidential election, Arkansas' modernization efforts seem to have been the exception rather than the rule.

During the Florida recount, a foreign journalist was asked how his country viewed the events occurring in the United States. I found his comments particularly telling. He was not concerned about the underlying health of our democracy; rather, he expressed amazement that the oldest and strongest democracy in the world had not made the necessary investments in the essential tools of democracy — modern election equipment. This particular journalist hit on a key point that I think many have missed because of the rancor that followed the Presidential election — namely, that our underlying system of democracy is, in fact, strong and vibrant. However, it needs a shot in the arm.

Whereas the response of some has been to point fingers, question motives, or ignore the problems displayed in Florida altogether, I am convinced that the most productive response to the 2000 election will be for federal, state and local officials to take a view similar to that of the foreign journalist -- namely, that we have a strong system which, at a minimum, needs some fine-tuning. In the short-term, we must refrain from engaging in battles of rhetoric and work together, using existing research and data, to identify the areas of greatest need and take the necessary steps to prevent a repeat of last fall.

It is early in the legislative session. However, the 2002 mid-term elections are only twenty months away. Congress must take immediate steps to provide the shot in the arm our democracy needs, so that our election systems will be ready for the scrutiny they will most certainly face at that time. To that end, I have introduced bipartisan legislation in the House to provide an immediate \$1.5 billion in funds to states and localities to help them purchase new voting equipment.

That is not to say that Congress should not also engage in more comprehensive debate about how to address the more contentious issues that surfaced in the 2000 election. The gentlemen from New York has introduced a proposal in the Senate with that very purpose in mind. In fact, scores of bills have been introduced since January that provide for more rigorous study of the issue, and allow Congress to consider more long-term solutions to the problems that surfaced in Florida and elsewhere.

Groups like the National Association of Secretaries of State, the Election Center, the League of Women Voters, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and those represented here today have already begun to examine these problems and formulate potential solutions. Although I am disappointed that it took a presidential election stalemate to bring this issue to the attention of the American public and to us as policymakers, I am hopeful that Congress will take this opportunity to bring the tools of democracy up to the standards of excellence that should be expected of the world's longest surviving and strongest democracy.

**Testimony of Congressman Asa Hutchinson**  
**Senate Commerce Committee**  
**“Improving Electoral Process”**  
**March 7, 2001**