

The Progressive Challenge: An Action Agenda for Electoral Reform
Rep. Dennis Kucinich: Opening Remarks
January 19, 2001

Voting is the only undervalued measure of equality in a democratic society. While all created equal, all don't end up equal -- inequalities in distribution of wealth, inequalities in education, inequalities in health care, inequalities in job opportunities, inequality in promotions, inequalities in housing.

Although our society has a great distance to go in addressing our inequalities in our society, there is only one way to do it effectively and constructively, and that is through the vote.

Through the vote all measures of inequality can be levelled. Through the vote we can strive to make the promise of America the reality of America, and all impediments to voting -- all impediments to whether through acts of commission or omission, whether unintentional or accidental, whether partisan or non-partisan, all impediments to voting represent a powerful and destructive undermining of the core of our democracy. It is our duty, our obligation, our sacred trust to knock down the walls of indifference, remove the barriers so that all Americans of every race, color and creed can walk with confidence into every voting booth in every precinct in every town, city and state of this nation and receive the ballot to which they are entitled. And then to vote, and then to have their vote count! And be counted! So while it is inevitable that all must review what happened yesterday, we must keep focused on tomorrow.

We are here because our national election was marred. Here a only a partial review. In Florida, voters experienced extensive barriers to the ballot box. On election day, there were police checkpoints within the vicinity of polling places in African-American neighborhoods. Residents testified that they felt intimidated by the checkpoints. According to Reuters, people were denied the right to vote even with voter registration cards and identification cards. Some of those denied a vote were even refused an affidavit to prove they had attempted to vote. The Washington Post reported that voters who thought they were registered were not found on precinct voting lists. Perhaps, some of these voters were among the 8,000 voters across the state were misidentified as felons or dead and were then incorrectly purged from voting lists. The Associated Press found that in Tampa, some polls closed with people still waiting in line to vote. The Miami Times wrote that some ballots of Haitian voters were thrown into garbage bags.

If a voter finally made it inside the voting booth, it was still not certain that his or her vote would count. Outmoded ballot machines and confusing ballots caused unusually high rates of ballots to be thrown out in precincts that are highly Democratic and with high percentages of African-Americans. In Miami-Dade County precincts where fewer than 30 percent of voters are black, about 3 percent of ballots were undervotes, meaning they did not register a vote for

president. In precincts where more than 70 percent of voters are African American, almost 10 percent of ballots were undervotes. The Washington Post revealed that in some precincts, it was almost 33 percent.

Investigations conducted by the Advancement Project and Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights under Change found more instances of discriminatory problems in Florida. Though required by law, bilingual ballots were not available at some of the 47 majority-Haitian precincts in Miami-Dade County. Hispanic voters in Osceola County alleged they were required to produce two forms of identification when only one was required. Some black voters were asked for a photo ID, when white voters were not asked.

These problems were not confined to Florida. In St. Louis, the Post-Dispatch found a laundry list of problems throughout the city. Voters not listed on voter registration rolls were allowed to vote. Ballots were missing. Potential voters were turned away from polling locations in evening hours.

Chicago voters also experienced many similar problems. In precincts where the majority of voters were black or Hispanic, the percent of disqualified ballots was higher than largely white precincts. Chicago precincts show a disturbing trend that as the minority population increases within voting precinct, the percentage of disqualified ballots likewise increases. There were 51 precincts where one of every six ballots lacked a vote for president. Ninety percent of the population in those districts was black or Hispanic.

Much private action has already been taken in response to these problems. Together, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Advancement Project, People for the American Way, ACLU and Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law filed suit on January 10, 2001. It alleges that disparate and unfair voting practices throughout the state of Florida created barriers to black voters, the invalidation of disproportionate number of votes cast by blacks, the wrongful purge of black voters from voter lists and failure to properly process registrations of black voters. The suit seeks fundamental change to voting practices in Florida to make them fair and equal.

The ACLU filed suit in federal court against the city of Chicago and state of Illinois to end the use of punch card ballots. A quirk in the state law forbids use of "second-chance" feature on the punch card machine that allows voters to know immediately if their attempted vote would be scanned as an undervote, and thus not counted.

The ACLU filed suit in state court on behalf of seven African American voters in DeKalb, Fulton and Cobb counties in Georgia. The complaint alleged that voters in some Georgia counties were ten times more likely than others to lose their right to vote because of "fatally flawed" system.

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights has begun its investigation into the Florida elections process. After hearing the first day of testimony, Chairwoman Mary Frances Berry was quoted by the Washington Post: "Voting in Florida is like there's some kind of goody in a box and you want to get it, but you've got to be persistent to get it."

The problems of obstructing certain citizens from voting, discarding their votes once they did vote, and not counting their votes are nationwide, systemic and an outrage.

I am here as Chairman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and as a member of the Democratic Caucus. I believe the Democratic Party must respond to the abundant evidence of electoral injustice with a sense of urgency. We must lead the charge on the issue of electoral reform. Democrats need to sustain the effort to ensure that every vote counts, and that every eligible citizen can vote. I believe it is the role of the Progressive Caucus to work aggressively within the Democratic Party to make sure it acts quickly, effectively and clearly to protect the voting rights of all citizens. My hope for today is that when we all leave this conference, we will be educated, energized to take action and directed toward which reforms and which means of achieving reform we must work to pass.

For many, this has been a traumatic election. But we must get through the trauma and the chaos to find our potential and moral compass to lead the way to a brighter tomorrow. The sirens of "would-a, could-a, should-a" call across the land but our attention must not be diverted. We must not be derailed in our journey towards a new America. The poet Tenneyson wrote, "Come my friends, 'tis not too late, to seek a newer world!" It's not too late. It's not too late. Moses spoke of the promised land and Dr. King re-echoed his call.

They call it the promised land because we've been promised we are going to get there. We've been promised by Washington, Jefferson and Paine. We've been promised by Lincoln, Roosevelt and Johnson. We've been promised by King and Kennedy. And now it is up to us to preserve that promise of a better America, with our minds, our hearts, with our heads and our hands, undeterred by tears and defeat, "facing the rising sun, 'til victory is won."