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**CHALLENGES FACING THE AMERICAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM:
RESEARCH PRIORITIES FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the activities and findings of the National Research Commission on Elections and Voting, organized in October, 2004 by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) to serve as a scholarly resource for nonpartisan insight into challenges facing the American electoral process.

Initial Activities

Start-up activities of the Commission began immediately after its formation. The SSRC launched a dedicated website to serve as an information clearinghouse and disseminator of the Commission's activities (<http://elections.ssrc.org>); it also inaugurated a daily monitoring system to track data, research, and claims from academic and nonacademic sources regarding electoral process controversies as they might arise after the election.

In the weeks following the presidential election on November 2, Commission members mobilized to respond to specific questions and controversies arising in the media. In a written report released on December 21, a Commission working group concluded that: a) publicly reported claims and arguments concerning alleged irregularities did not – based on the data then available – present compelling evidence of election fraud; and b) a definitive resolution of some allegations might never be possible because of inadequate data and insufficient transparency of the election process. The group recommended that national standards be adopted to ensure the full and transparent collection of a wide variety of electoral process data.

Major Findings: Priority Areas for Future Research

With the 2004 election now behind us, Commission members have deliberated to identify ten priority areas for potential reform that invite a concerted social scientific response. These areas, discussed in the body of the final report, include:

- Improving the process of registration and voting
- Nonpartisan election administration
- Voters' perceptions regarding the registration and voting process
- Felon disenfranchisement
- The political engagement of immigrants
- Race and the electoral process
- The voting rights of persons with cognitive impairments
- Factors affecting voter turnout
- Reform of the Electoral College
- Partisanship and districting

Although the research questions raised by each of these issues vary, they converge in arguing for a collaborative response among social scientists. To facilitate the process, the Commission recommends that the following steps be taken:

- Social scientists from diverse disciplines should come together to form national problem-oriented working groups to review the status of current research and facilitate the design and implementation of new lines of inquiry.
- The social science community should work with public officials and the media to improve the accessibility and breadth of data necessary to permit researchers to examine a wide range of electoral process questions.
- Social scientists and funding organizations should encourage comparative research, drawing on the experiences of different states and nations, to help illuminate options for electoral reform.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The National Research Commission on Elections and Voting was created by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in October of 2004. It emerged from the recognition that the United States lacked a nonpartisan panel of experts that could bring social science research to bear on issues of election legitimacy and integrity – despite the controversy surrounding the 2000 presidential election and despite apprehensions that the 2004 election could result in a similar crisis. Nineteen scholars from different disciplines, with well-established expertise in this subject area, agreed to serve on the Commission. Alexander Keyssar of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University was appointed as its chair.

From the outset, the Commission had two broadly defined tasks. The first was short-term: to serve as a high-visibility media resource providing nonpartisan expert analysis of voter access and integrity issues that might emerge in the election on November 2. The Commission was particularly concerned with voter disenfranchisement, irregularities in registration and balloting procedures, problems with election technology, and allegations of voter intimidation. Its short-term mandate also included the possibility that the Commission would bring its collective expertise to bear on any disputes that arose out of the election.

The second component of the Commission's mandate was more long-term: to reflect on and to try to articulate areas where social science research could inform and potentially guide needed reforms to our electoral system.

Understandably, much of the intellectual backdrop to the Commission's launching was shaped by the events surrounding the 2000 presidential election. That extraordinary event in our political history had, in an urgent fashion, brought to public attention numerous longstanding – and, to many people, surprising – defects in the ways in which elections were conducted in the United States. Perhaps equally distressing was the fact that public discussion of these election issues was immediately embedded in partisan debate and in the adversarial process of litigation. Nonpartisan voices that were informed by research were silent or drowned out. It was the hope of the SSRC – and the members of the Commission – that we could do better in 2004.

As it turned out, the 2004 election was not a replay of its predecessor. President Bush won the popular vote by the significant margin of 3.5 million votes, and Senator Kerry conceded the election by the afternoon of November 3. There was, thus, no electoral crisis or sustained series of controversies that invited or demanded the expertise of scholars – at least with respect to any analyses that might affect the election's outcome.

Yet the election was hardly problem-free. Charges of irregularities abounded, and many doubtless occurred. Some machines did malfunction; long lines kept voters from casting their ballots in some locales; and interpretations of new legal provisions (such as the Help America Vote Act's [HAVA] provisional ballots requirement) were beset with controversy. Several local and state elections remained unsettled long after November 2, and had the popular vote in the potentially decisive state of Ohio been 60,000 votes closer, a crisis reminiscent of the 2000 election could easily have transpired. Moreover, despite Senator Kerry's concession, many

Americans continued to express doubt about the legitimacy of the election: a remarkable feature of the election's aftermath was the rapid appearance and spread of claims (particularly on the internet) that fraud had permeated the presidential election and determined its outcome.

For all of these reasons – and others – the National Research Commission on Elections and Voting is unanimous in its belief that nonpartisan social science continues to have an important role to play in understanding and improving the American electoral system. The recent election did not replicate the drama of 2000, but it did demonstrate once again that the institutions of our democracy could use updating, improvement, and revitalization. Scholars have significant contributions to make to that process.

II. THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: INITIAL COMMISSION ACTIVITIES AND FINDINGS

In the days immediately following the November 2 presidential election, major media outlets described the process as having proceeded smoothly. President Bush's clear victory in the popular vote, coupled with his apparently decisive wins in the closely watched states of Ohio and Florida, led many observers to declare 2004 a "success": there were few widely publicized stories of major voting snafus. Nonetheless, in the weeks that followed, several claims regarding major purported irregularities grew in scope and captured the attention of increasing numbers of Americans. To document and appraise the significance of these developments, the Commission undertook two complementary tasks in the weeks following the election: the launching of a media and resource clearinghouse project, and the completion of an interim report examining allegations of major irregularities.

A. Media and Resource Clearinghouse Project

A dedicated Commission website (<http://elections.ssrc.org>) was unveiled on October 28, containing a full list of members and links to additional information, public announcements, and major organizational resources for data and monitoring of electoral process concerns. On November 1, Commission staff at the SSRC inaugurated a database and daily monitoring effort to track, document, and synthesize data, research, and claims regarding problems with the electoral process and means to solve them. By the beginning of December, the database included over 350 major media articles, 90 organizations, 35 data sources, and over 50 engaged academic researchers. Specific debates (for example, discrepancies between exit polls and vote tallies in Florida, the counting of provisional ballots in Ohio, problems at polling places, and electoral administration and oversight) were also being archived. Data and resources were made available to the public on the Commission website.

B. The Interim Report

The first Commission working group issued its preliminary analysis of current evidence of significant voting irregularities during the November 2 election on December 22.¹ The report

¹ Some members of the Commission have continued examining specific controversies regarding the 2004 presidential election since the completion of the interim report. Their findings will be made publicly available as additional work is completed.

used available research and data to examine exit polling discrepancies in Florida, polling place conditions/practices and counting controversies in Ohio, and current litigation. The briefing served to consolidate and analyze the findings from current research and available data, but it also included forward-looking statements concerning broader electoral process challenges facing the country and the research needed to help address them. Major conclusions included the following:

- Discrepancies between early exit poll results and popular vote tallies in several states may have been due to a variety of factors and did not constitute *prima facie* evidence for fraud in the current election.
- Recent studies noting disparities between county registration rates and voting outcomes in Florida, as well as apparent "machine effects" favoring George W. Bush, were of limited significance and could not be considered as evidence of election fraud.
- Ohio witnessed significant variability in wait times in some districts, sporadic instances of machine malfunctions, and possible voting tabulation errors, undercounts, and overcounts. Based on the data available, the working group concluded that it was extremely unlikely that the absence of these irregularities would have shifted popular vote tallies sufficiently to change the declared winner in Ohio. However, continuing uncertainty over the extent of irregularities merits closer public scrutiny and full disclosure of relevant data.
- A definitive resolution of some allegations of malfeasance or irregularities in the most recent presidential election may never be possible, due to inadequate data and insufficient transparency of the election administration process in many states.
- To restore public credibility in our election system, and to ensure the effective resolution of electoral process controversies in future elections, full and transparent collection and public disclosure of electoral process data are vital.

III. AN AGENDA FOR REFORM AND RESEARCH

Although the 2004 election did not produce a crisis in American politics, it did reveal numerous problems with the conduct of elections and the exercise of democratic rights in the United States. Many of these problems (such as those involving registration procedures and the technology of voting) had attracted significant public attention before 2004; others (for instance, those linked to provisional voting) acquired a heightened level of visibility during this election; and yet others were new. Both before and after the election, the news media (meaning both traditional media and the internet) were filled with reports of potential and actual impediments to the smooth conduct of elections; lawsuits and the threat of lawsuits abounded.²

² Electionline maintains a list of lawsuits filed before the 2004 election (<http://www.electionline.org/site/docs/pdf/Litigation.update.Sep.30.04.pdf>, last accessed 02/22/05). The National Voting Rights Institute (NVRI) also maintains a weblog cataloging the progress of lawsuits in the aftermath of the Ohio election (http://www.nvri.org/about/ohio_recount.shtml, last accessed 02/22/05).

Since the disputed election of 2000, many American citizens and advocacy groups have been pressing for reforms to our electoral institutions – reforms that would go well beyond those legislated by some states and by Congress through HAVA. Movements for electoral reform of this type have a venerable (and honorable) history in the United States. In addition to expanding the franchise so that excluded groups became eligible to vote, these movements have also sought to safeguard the honesty of elections, protect the rights of individual voters, and facilitate access to the polls. Among the many achievements of such movements have been the secret ballot itself, registration laws, and the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (the "Motor Voter Bill"). Democracy in the United States has never consisted of a fixed set of institutions and procedures; change has been the norm, and many of the most important changes have occurred in the wake of elections in which latent problems rose to the surface and became visible.

It is the view of this Commission that significant reforms in American electoral institutions are very much needed at this juncture in American political history. There is ample evidence that our electoral system does not match – and sometimes frustrates – the promise of American democracy.³ There is also abundant anecdotal evidence that many Americans have lost confidence in the fairness and neutrality of our electoral processes: one of the more notable features of the weeks immediately following the November election was the proliferation of theories and claims that the presidential election had been stolen.⁴

Yet, as social scientists, our goal here is not to articulate a comprehensive reform agenda. What we seek to do instead is to identify areas of reform that could be illuminated by further intellectual inquiry and social scientific research. In so doing, we recognize that we have stretched the mandate of the Commission a bit beyond its original focus on questions of election integrity; inescapably, matters of electoral process have led us to think about institutional structures as well as specific policies.

It is our hope – as scholars who have devoted many years to studying elections and voting – that further academic research concerning the issues outlined below may help to guide reformers and public officials who will have to wrestle with a complex cluster of institutional problems.

A. Improving the Process of Registration and Voting

In the wake of the 2000 election, considerable public attention was focused on defects in our highly decentralized processes of voter registration, voting, and vote counting. In advance of the election, numerous states, including Florida, enacted legislation aimed at remedying these

³ An analysis of the major problems that arose during the 2004 election can be found in the interim report written by a working group of this Commission (<http://elections.ssrc.org/research/InterimReport122204.pdf>, last accessed 02/22/05). Other reports have been filed by groups such as the Institute for Policy Studies, Common Cause, and People for the American Way.

⁴ The Commission's interim report, cited above, found that most of these claims could not be substantiated by the evidence publicly available when the report was completed in mid-December. Various claims of election fraud were, however, floated on websites such as <http://www.democraticunderground.com> (last accessed 02/22/05), <http://www.truthout.org> (last accessed 02/22/05), and <http://www.contestthevote.org/> (last accessed 02/22/05).

defects,⁵ and HAVA, of course, took steps in the same direction at the federal level. Nonetheless, few experts believe that all (or even most) of these problems have been solved, and most states still have not implemented the key HAVA provision requiring computerized statewide registration lists.⁶

Moreover, each election since 2000 has given rise to widespread reports of irregularities that have prevented citizens from casting their ballots or produced questionable vote tallies. In 2004, it was the existence of such reports in the potentially decisive state of Ohio that led several members of Congress to invoke a rare procedure questioning the certification of that state's electoral votes.⁷

Anecdotal reports, however, are not quite the same thing as systematic data, and we would like to encourage the social scientific community to collect, assemble, and analyze the best possible data bearing on a wide range of issues concerning registration and voting.⁸ This would include survey research as well as the compilation of narratives and reports coming out of the recent election and all future elections. It would also require systematic comparison of actual rules, processes, and implementation practices, as well as assessment of their relative effects on registration rates.

Below we have attempted to itemize issues, questions, and problems where further scholarly scrutiny would be useful to the formulation of public policies. We recognize that some of these items overlap with one another, and we do not regard this as an exhaustive list. But we do think it would be a good place to begin.

⁵ Nonetheless, Florida continued to have registration problems prior to the 2004 election. One particularly stark incident was the declaration of an assistant supervisor of elections in Duval County that too many voter registration cards were being filed and that his office would not be able to process all of them, despite its legal obligation to do so (ACORN, Advancement Project, Florida Consumer Action Network, NAACP, People for the American Way, and Project Vote. "Press Release: Groups to File Suit against Duval County Election Officials, Challenge Efforts to Disenfranchise Voters." 20 September 2004. <http://releases.usnewswire.com/GetRelease.asp?id=36517>, last accessed 02/22/05; Becker, Jo. "Pushing to Be Counted in Fla.; Groups Say that Blacks May Not Be Heard at Polls." *The Washington Post*. 13 October 2004). Another problem was the refusal of the State Supervisor of Elections to legitimate voter registration cards that did not have a "Citizen Check Box" marked, even if the voter had signed the affidavit at the bottom declaring legal citizenship (Fessenden, Ford. "Voter Registrations Hit Snag over Citizenship Check Box." *The New York Times*. 2 October 2004).

⁶ HAVA established the deadline of January 1, 2004 for states to implement computerized statewide voter registration databases. Forty-one states applied for and received a waiver, extending this deadline to January 1, 2006 (Office of Civil Rights Evaluation, United State Commission on Civil Rights. "Is America Ready to Vote?" *Election Readiness Briefing Paper*. April 2004). State implementation plans have been cataloged by the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, DEMOS, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, and People for the American Way ("HAVA Implementation in the 50 States: A Summary of State Implementation Plans." 1 November 2003. <http://www.demos-usa.org/pub147.cfm>, last accessed 02/22/05).

⁷ Boxer, Barbara. "Press Release: Statement on Her Objection to the Certification of Ohio's Electoral Votes." *Office of Barbara Boxer*. 6 January 2005. <http://boxer.senate.gov/news/record.cfm?id=230450>, last accessed 02/22/05.

⁸ We also encourage election officials everywhere to preserve and make accessible raw data that might be of value to scholars and others trying to examine the integrity and fairness of the electoral system. Examples of such data are precinct level totals for the number of ballots cast, including ballots cast at polling places; ballots cast absentee, early, or by mail; ballots cast at a non-polling place; provisional ballots cast and accepted; and absentee ballots distributed.

1. Registration

Due to earlier reforms and the passage and implementation of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, there is greater uniformity in registration laws than at any point since the widespread adoption of registration requirements in the American states in the 1870s.⁹ Nevertheless, there is still variation in registration procedures from one state to the next. The effectiveness of these different procedures for facilitating turnout and preventing fraud is worthy of study. So too are other registration-related issues, including the virtues and problems with same-day registration and the value of requiring potential registrants to present identification at different stages in the process.¹⁰ In this regard, it would be valuable to monitor and study the updating and consolidation of registration lists that has been mandated by HAVA and that will occur over the next year. Survey research could also help to determine the size of one particular problem that recurs at every election: the arrival at the polls of individuals who believe that they are registered and then find that they are not.¹¹

2. National Standards

The control of election procedures in the United States has traditionally been left to the states and, in many respects, to counties or municipalities. Problems that have arisen in recent elections have led many critics to call for national standards to replace the highly decentralized system now in place, yet the call for such standards has also provoked considerable resistance.¹² Systematic study of these issues, perhaps drawing on comparative research to identify how different kinds of federal systems manage the registration and voting process, is clearly warranted.

3. National Identification Cards

In many countries, voters receive portable, nationally issued voter identification cards. It is claimed that such cards could obviate many of the problems experienced by voters in American elections, but there has also been substantial resistance to the issuance of such cards. Could they be effective in the United States? Is the resistance grounded in realistic concerns?¹³

⁹ Keyssar, Alexander. *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*. New York, NY: Basic, 2000, p. 152.

¹⁰ In the 2004 election, Arizonans voted to require proof of citizenship for voter registration. The law went into effect on January 25, 2005 (Wingett, Yvonne. "Citizen Proof is Required to Vote." *The Arizona Republic*. 26 January 2005. <http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/0126prop200-voting26.html>, last accessed 02/22/05).

¹¹ Activist organizations have been particularly vocal about this issue after it came to national attention in 2000. To the best of this Commission's knowledge, however, no systematic survey data currently exist to assess the extent of the problem. Documented anecdotal evidence is available at <https://voteprotect.org/index.php?display=EIRMapNation&tab=ALL> (last accessed 02/22/05).

¹² Considerable debate was generated prior to passage of the final HAVA legislation. The opinions expressed during that time are incorporated into the final report of the National Commission on Election Reform (*To Insure Pride and Confidence in the Electoral Process*. 8 August 2001. http://www.reformelections.org/data/reports/99_full_report.pdf, last accessed 02/22/05).

¹³ For literature on different national registration system models, see the SSRC bibliography available at http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc.

4. The Act of Voting

Americans now vote in remarkably varied ways: in person or by mail; on Election Day or even weeks before Election Day; and using many different technologies, ranging from paper ballots to optical scanners to punch-card machines to a new generation of electronic voting devices. Numerous research questions can be posed about the actual act of voting. How efficient and error-prone are the different methods?¹⁴ How easy is it for voters of differing ages, linguistic abilities, or education levels to use different types of ballots? Are the polling place accessibility requirements for voters with disabilities being met? How long do people in different jurisdictions actually have to wait to vote, and who determines the allocation of voting machines to different polling places? Can states facilitate voting by mailing polling place information to registrants in advance of Election Day? Does mailing sample ballots to registrants reduce the time spent in the voting booth and diminish how long people wait in line to vote?

A related set of questions applies to the increasingly common practice of permitting no-excuse absentee voting, mail-in balloting, or early voting. How common has it been in recent elections for people to not receive absentee ballots that they have requested?¹⁵ Are error rates higher on absentee and early ballots than on Election Day voting? Do early voting and no-excuse absentee voting really ease problems with long lines? Does early voting lead to some citizens making a decision based on insufficient information? Does early voting (or voting over a period of weeks) diminish citizens' sense of participating in a meaningful, public event?¹⁶

5. Provisional Ballots

Under HAVA, all states were required in 2004 to offer provisional ballots to voters who arrived at the polls and found that they were not locally listed (some states had begun to use provisional ballots well before the passage of HAVA). However, the rules under which provisional ballots are offered and subsequently counted as legal votes vary from state to state. These variations – as well as their origins and consequences – invite scrutiny before the next election. We recommend that election officials in the different states make available to the

¹⁴ The Caltech/MIT Voting Project has already begun much of this work. For their analysis of equipment performance in the 2004 election, see: Stewart, Charles III. "Residual Vote in the 2004 Election." February 2005. http://www.vote.caltech.edu/media/documents/vtp_wp21v2.3.pdf, last accessed 02/22/05.

For analysis of other elections (including 2000), see: <http://www.vote.caltech.edu/>, last accessed 02/22/05.

¹⁵ The most publicized case of this in the 2004 election was in Florida's Broward and Palm Beach Counties. Approximately 60,000 absentee ballots were never mailed, even though the Supervisors of Elections claimed to have delivered them in a timely fashion to their local post offices. The local post offices stated that they never received the ballots. Upon hearing the news a week before the election, panicked voters requested that the ballots be resent. This led to disagreements about who should have to pay for the express mailing of the ballots, leading some to complain of a new form of poll tax (Nagourney, Adam and Abby Goodnough. "Passion and Election Disputes on Rise in Florida as Vote Nears." *The New York Times*. 28 October 2004; Shapiro, Ari. "Absentee Ballots Go Missing in Florida's Broward County." *NPR's All Things Considered*. Audio Recording. 28 October 2004. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4131522>, last accessed 02/22/05).

¹⁶ Most examinations of absentee and/or mail balloting examine the practices from a turnout and participation perspective. Few, if any, examine whether these alternative methods of voting decrease the political significance of the act.

public and to scholars all of the relevant data needed to assess the workings of the provisional ballot provisions.¹⁷

6. Two Conceptual Issues

Coursing through all of these matters regarding the process of registration and voting are two significant conceptual issues: first, the trade-offs between preventing fraud and maximizing access to the polls; and second, the transparency of the electoral process itself.

Fraud versus Access

An inescapable issue in the design of election procedures is that they are commonly obliged to serve two, sometimes contradictory, purposes: preventing electoral fraud and maximizing access to the polls. Frequently, procedural steps are implemented in order to deter fraudulent voting but then are criticized for putting obstacles in the way of legitimate voters; similarly, efforts to facilitate access (such as the Motor Voter Bill) have been opposed because of stated fears that they would encourage fraud.¹⁸ Notably, however, research that actually tests these propositions (with regard to how they might vary with different features of electoral systems) is scarce. Remedying that scarcity could be an important contribution by the scholarly community.¹⁹

Transparency and Legitimacy

A key component of any electoral system is its ability to gain and maintain the confidence of those participating in it. That confidence depends, in part, on the system's transparency – that is, on the ability of citizens, political actors, and the media to witness the electoral process from registration to the final counting of votes.

For numerous reasons, the American electoral process is less than fully transparent, as was made clear by many of the charges that circulated in the aftermath of the 2004 election. The act of tallying the ballots (especially with certain voting technologies) was invisible to observers, as were the steps through which administrative and procedural decisions were made. The lack of transparency also extended to issues such as the testing and certification of voting devices and the accounting of the financial details of election administration.

Social scientists can help strengthen the public's confidence in election oversight institutions by trying to identify mechanisms that would enhance transparency. What kinds of auditing and accountability measures, for example, are associated with greater legitimacy and integrity of election and voting systems across different regions and countries? Similarly, social scientists can help gauge how public perceptions of legitimacy and transparency affect voting

¹⁷ A comparison of different state laws governing provisional ballots is available from the Moritz College of Law at The Ohio State University (<http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/electionlaw/provisional04.html>, last accessed 02/22/05).

¹⁸ President George H.W. Bush expressed a fear of fraud when he vetoed the Motor Voter Bill in the summer of 1992. See Keyssar (2000), p. 314. The text of the veto message was reprinted in *The Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* (4 July 1992, p. 1983).

¹⁹ The extensive literature on voter registration and turnout that does exist is documented in the SSRC bibliography available at http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc.

behavior and turnout. How do Americans currently perceive the legitimacy of the different components of our election process, particularly given the current (and rather rapid) introduction of new technologies?

B. Nonpartisan Election Administration

Any close scrutiny of problems with registration and voting in the United States inescapably runs up against one of the most distinctive – and potentially troublesome – features of the current American electoral system: the extent to which election administration remains in the hands of partisan, elected officials. These officials range from elected secretaries of state to members of county canvassing boards; at all levels, much of the discretionary administration of elections is in the hands of partisan actors. This discretion in and of itself is not something that can be – or should be – eliminated through substantive election laws; no matter how well drafted, election laws will never be able to anticipate in advance the full range of issues that can arise during elections, particularly close elections.

The partisan control of election administration is problematic in at least two respects. The first, of course, is that it creates the possibility that administrative decisions will be made to serve partisan purposes. The second is that it creates an unavoidable appearance of conflict between an election official's administrative role and his or her partisan loyalty. These issues loomed large in Florida in 2000; they reappeared vividly in Ohio in 2004, for example in decisions that were made regarding provisional ballots.²⁰ (Although these two well-known examples involved Republican control of the electoral apparatus, this is a bipartisan problem.) These problems can be addressed only through the development of nonpartisan institutions and processes of electoral administration.

Since the United States is unique in the extent to which it leaves the power over election administration in the hands of partisan actors, research related to this issue could well begin with comparative analysis, some of which is already available.²¹ What institutional structures do other democracies use to oversee different aspects of the electoral process? Which structures appear to work best? Are there foreseeable, if unintended, risks or pitfalls with nonpartisan administration? This comparative approach could also be extended to studies of different states within the United States, since state institutions vary widely, and some states have already made

²⁰ Three separate legal challenges were filed against the provisional ballot policy of Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, who also served as the chairman of George W. Bush's reelection committee in Ohio. Secretary Blackwell interpreted the new provisional ballot law in the strictest sense – that is, that only within one's correct precinct could one file a provisional ballot (*Sandusky County Democratic Party et al. v. Blackwell*, 386 F.3d 815, 815-16 [6th Cir. 2004]; *Sandusky County Democratic Party et al. v. Blackwell*, 387 F.3d 565, 568 [6th Cir. 2004]; *League of Women Voters v. Blackwell*, 340 F.Supp.2d 823, 828 [N.D. Ohio 2004]). Other charges against Secretary Blackwell came during the summer of 2004 when he ruled that only voter registration cards on 80-pound paper would be accepted, which was seen as a direct assault on the voter registration efforts of nonpartisan progressive groups. See, for instance: Candisky, Catherine. "Blackwell Ends Paper Chase: Some Could Be Unable to Vote Because of Flap over Registration Forms." *Columbus Dispatch*. 29 September 2004. After the vote, and during the process of the recount, Secretary Blackwell was accused of being purposefully slow in ratifying the vote, which is the first step to allowing a recount (*Rios et al. v. Blackwell*).

<http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/electionlaw/docs/ohio/Rios/complaint.pdf>, last accessed 02/22/05).

²¹ For recent comparative scholarship, see bibliography available at http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc.

significant efforts to develop mechanisms to insure that election administration is consistent, uniform, and nonpartisan.

Research could help guide the development of both the structures and the functions of less partisan electoral institutions. If, for example, a state sought to create a new "election commission," should that commission be bipartisan or nonpartisan? How would its members be selected, and in what ways would they be accountable? What precisely would the commission's function be? Should it deal with ballot design, with access to polling places, with recounts? What would its relationship be to elected officials, including the legislature? What problems have arisen with different designs in the past?²²

The administration of elections is inescapably a sensitive terrain, and the details of any new institutions will matter. Social scientific research will not provide all of the answers, but surely it can help.

C. Voters' Perceptions and Misperceptions of Eligibility and of the Use of Registration Information

During the days leading up to the recent election, there were occasional reports in the press of phone calls being made or flyers being distributed (particularly in poor and minority neighborhoods) claiming that men and women could not vote if their legal records had blemishes such as unpaid traffic tickets or the failure to pay child support.²³ Interestingly, several scholars studying poor and minority neighborhoods have also bumped into evidence that there are citizens who, in fact, believe that unmet obligations of this type would disqualify them from voting – or that registering to vote and showing up to vote could somehow provoke prosecution. This is an arena that begs for more research, particularly among the poor and less well educated. Just how widespread are such beliefs? Is there any substance to them at all – that is, do any jurisdictions, in fact, use voter registration data for any law enforcement purposes? Are there significant numbers of potential voters who erroneously believe that they are not eligible to vote – and if so, how might this problem be remedied?

A variant of these questions also ought to be posed about (and to) a special – and unfortunately large – sub-population: men and women who have been convicted of felonies and have served out their sentences. The political rights of such individuals vary greatly by state, and, once again, there exists anecdotal evidence that misinformation about their political rights is widespread. Determining just how widespread that misinformation might be – and what can be done about it – could prove to be an important research endeavor, especially given the fact that

²² See bibliography available at http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc for work on redistricting, partisanship, and nonpartisan alternatives.

²³ See, for example: Becker, Jo and David Finkel. "Now They're Registered, Now They're Not: Election Officials Express Dismay at Extent of Misinformation, Variety of Tricks Targeting Voters." *The Washington Post*. 31 October 2004; Holland, Jennifer. "NAACP, Election Officials Caution Voters of Bogus Letter." *The Miami Herald*. 29 October 2004; Blackwell, Victor. "Calls Made to Discourage Voting." *NBC 25: WHAG*. 8 October 2004. <http://www.whag.com/news/default.asp?mode=shownews&id=2536>, last accessed 01/12/05; Nathans, Aaron. "GOP Fliers Give Wrong Voting Info: UW Tries to Alert Students." *The Capital Times*. 30 October 2004.

the United States contains approximately 5.6 million citizens who have, at one time or another, served time in a state or federal prison.²⁴

D. Felon Disenfranchisement

Special concerns about felons also come up in another context. A large group of American citizens who are currently unable to vote consists of felons and ex-felons, who are disenfranchised for varying lengths of time, depending upon the state in which they reside.²⁵ Whether men and women who are convicted of committing crimes ought to lose their political rights (and, if so, for how long) is, in part, a normative judgment: in many countries, even prison inmates routinely cast ballots. Yet there are also empirical dimensions to such policies – for instance, whether the reintegration of ex-felons into society is aided by a rapid restoration of their political rights after they have served their sentences. Particularly since the 2000 election, a substantial amount of research has been conducted on these subjects, but a further broadening of our knowledge would clearly be helpful.²⁶

E. Immigrant Voting

There are approximately 28 million immigrants currently living in the United States.²⁷ Immigrants constitute approximately ten percent of the United States population and 13 percent of the voting-age population, nearly rivaling the 15 percent figure registered during the peak waves of European immigration.

The increasing demographic strength of most new immigrant groups (among whom Asians and Latinos are the fastest growing) is not reflected in their political involvement. Citizenship is a key barrier that slows the translation of the immigrant population into voters. In the 2000 election, for example, only 34 percent of adult Asian American residents were registered to vote; the figure for adult Latinos was 38 percent.²⁸ In contrast, fully 74 percent of blacks and 78 percent of whites were registered. The gap narrows among adult citizens—in 2000, Asian American citizens had a registration rate of 63%, and Latino citizens 65%.²⁹

²⁴ See: "5.6M U.S. Adults Have Done Time." *CBS News*. Transcript. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/08/17/national/main568747.shtml>, last accessed 02/22/05. Of these, approximately 4.7 million are currently denied voting rights. See: Right to Vote. "Right to Vote's FAQ on Felony Disfranchisement." http://www.righttovote.org/upload/facts/290_UFile_FAQ%20for%20Web.doc, last accessed 02/22/05.

²⁵ Among the fifty states, only Maine and Vermont impose no restrictions on the voting rights of felons (<http://www.righttovote.org/state.asp>, last accessed 02/22/05).

²⁶ See bibliography available at http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc for academic work on felon disenfranchisement.

²⁷ According to the 2000 United States Census (<http://www.census.gov>, last accessed 02/22/05).

²⁸ The term Asian American is used to refer to any person of Asian origin who is an immigrant, permanent resident, or US-born, including citizens and noncitizen legal residents.

²⁹ These figures are still lower than the comparable ones for blacks and whites, but they clearly demonstrate that differential rates of citizenship ought to be taken into account when analyzing the effect of race and ethnicity. Figures are drawn from the *Current Population Survey: Supplement for Voting and Registration*. United States Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2000. <http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/vote/votemain.htm>, last accessed 02/22/05. For work on immigrant political participation, see bibliography available at http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc.

According to one report, there are over 12 million legal permanent residents who remain noncitizens and are thus barred from voting.³⁰ How much of this is due to the current backlog and delay in processing citizenship applications is a question well worth investigating. So too is the relationship between suffrage and other forms of civic engagement: are noncitizen immigrants, who cannot vote, less likely than citizens to engage in other forms of civic and political participation?

Once immigrants become citizens, their rates of turnout improve significantly. Yet turnout by immigrant citizens is still lower than it is for the native-born, suggesting the need for further research into the particular barriers encountered by immigrants. Are the current provisions to provide translated materials and oral assistance under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act being met? Are they sufficient to meet the needs of immigrant voters?

The presence of millions of noncitizen, legal residents also raises a question that has recurred throughout American history: should resident noncitizens be permitted to vote, in all elections and particularly in local elections? Here, comparative research would be particularly useful, since numerous other countries have adopted creative mechanisms for incorporating taxpaying, resident noncitizens into their electorates. Further study would also be warranted of the consequences of noncitizen voting in those locales in the United States – past and present – that have permitted noncitizens to vote.³¹

F. Race, Discrimination, and the Voting Rights Act

Both in 2000 and in 2004, numerous stories surfaced in the press suggesting that the African American community in various locales (most visibly, Florida in 2000 and Ohio in 2004) had encountered distinctive obstacles to registration and voting. In the wake of the 2000 election, the United States Civil Rights Commission, after a lengthy investigation, concluded that there was a "strong basis for concluding that violations of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) occurred in Florida."³²

It is no secret that many African Americans feel particularly vulnerable to policies, procedural devices, and political tricks that could once again deprive them of their political rights. This is not surprising given their long history of disfranchisement in the United States. Accordingly, it is of considerable importance that the social scientific community promote research to determine whether or not racial biases are operating in any locales in the United

³⁰ Hayduk, Ronald. "The Weight of History: Election Reform during the Progressive Era and Today." In *Democracy's Moment: Reforming the American Political System for the 21st Century*. Eds. Ronald Hayduk and Kevin Mattson. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002, p. 2.

³¹ There is a large scholarship on the German model in particular, where long-term taxpaying noncitizens can vote in local elections. See, for instance: Kastoryano, Riva. *Negotiating Identities: States and Immigrants in France and Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002. For the history of noncitizen voting rights in the United States, see Keyssar (2000).

³² United States Commission on Civil Rights. *Voting Irregularities in Florida during the 2000 Presidential Election: Executive Summary*. Washington, DC: US Commission on Civil Rights, 2001. <http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/vote2000/report/exesum.htm>, last accessed 02/22/05. A dissenting statement was filed by Commissioners Abigail Thernstrom and Russell G. Redenbaugh (<http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/vote2000/report/dissent.htm>, last accessed 02/22/05).

States, with respect to the ability of African Americans or other minorities to cast their ballots and have their votes counted.

With critical parts of the Voting Rights Act, in particular Section Five, up for renewal in 2007, the need for the best possible data and scholarship on this issue is particularly urgent.³³ Research should focus on a number of important issues, several of which are particularly salient. First, in what ways, if any, are voters of color vulnerable to race discrimination in the political process? Second, how can Congress restructure the Voting Rights Act to assure that all voters have an opportunity to participate in the political process without experiencing racial discrimination?³⁴ What conclusions should be drawn from the social science research that has questioned whether the "safe districting" strategy of earlier years is still necessary or desirable, or should be modified in some way? What does current social science suggest about whether it would be preferable to create districts in which coalitions of black and white voters would be needed to elect candidates? Are some of the traditional approaches to implementing Section Five now counterproductive to the interests of black voters?

G. Voting Rights of Persons with Cognitive Impairments

In the United States, as in most western nations, the elderly constitute one of the fastest growing population groups. This demographic trend suggests that new, and more expert, attention ought to be focused on a sensitive, yet not unimportant issue: the voting rights of persons with cognitive impairments. At present, 1.6 million people in the United States live in nursing homes, the majority of whom have dementia; and the number of persons living in related kinds of long-term care facilities such as assisted living is growing rapidly. In addition, the nation possesses many citizens diagnosed with psychiatric disorders who reside in institutional settings. The laws shaping the political rights of these citizens vary from state to state and often impose restrictions that may not be appropriate. Further, whether and how residents of such facilities actually vote depends in part on the decisions of staff, who often receive little guidance on the criteria that govern the exercise of political rights for patients.

Several avenues of research seem warranted. First, what is a "reasonable accommodation" (in line with the Americans with Disabilities Act) for a person with cognitive impairment, and what should long-term care staff do to help residents appropriately exercise

³³ Certain fundamental prohibitions against discrimination were established by the 15th Amendment and others were made permanent by the Voting Rights Act. However, specific sections and special provisions of the Voting Rights Act will be up for renewal. These sections and provisions have been extended three times previously, in 1970, 1975 and 1982 (United States Department of Justice. "Voting Rights Act Clarification." 2 April 1998. <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/misc/clarify3.htm>, last accessed 02/22/05). People for the American Way offers a description of Section Five as "[requiring] covered jurisdictions to get approval, or pre-clearance, from federal authorities (either the attorney general or the federal court for the District of Columbia) prior to implementing any changes in their voting laws or procedures. The jurisdiction has the burden of proving that a procedure change does not have the purpose, and would not have the effect, of denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race or color or membership in a language minority" (People for the American Way. "The Voting Rights Act of 1965, What Expires in 2007 and What Does Not." 2004. <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oId=15121#2>, last accessed 02/22/05).

³⁴ For accounts of discrimination and its impact on the 2004 election, see the interim report of this Commission. See also: House Judiciary Committee Democratic Staff. "Preserving Democracy: What Went Wrong in Ohio." 5 January 2005. http://elections.ssrc.org/research/preserving_democracy.pdf, last accessed 02/22/05.

their political rights? (This question, of course, also pertains to citizens with other types of disabilities, as described in the “Act of Voting” section, above). Second, how is this issue addressed in other nations, for example in Australia where voting is mandatory? Third, how and under what circumstances can the capacity of an individual to vote best be measured?³⁵

H. Voter Turnout

Although the 2004 election witnessed a surge in voter turnout, it is notable that even in a presidential election where partisan passions were high, 40 percent of the potential electorate did not show up at the polls.³⁶ Political scientists and historians have, of course, been analyzing turnout figures for decades, trying to explain the relatively low levels of participation in American elections; and the scholarly community, although not unanimous in its views, has significantly enhanced our understanding of why people do and do not vote. Yet our understanding of how eligibility provisions, voter perceptions, registration procedures, voting accessibility, and other factors influence turnout across different groups is still incomplete. Several sections of this report allude to some of these questions, but others can be raised and there is much work left to be done. In 2004, for example, why were turnout percentages so varied across the states and across different cities and towns?³⁷ Can the differences be accounted for largely by the social attributes (such as education, income, and age) of their residents? Or, are there important contextual effects? Are there different “cultures of participation” among different communities – defined geographically, ethnically, or in socio-economic terms – in our nation? How stable is turnout within different communities, and what can be learned by examples of fluctuations in turnout levels? What efforts to increase turnout have been made (and by whom), and which ones have succeeded and which have failed? Do different types of electoral systems – such as proportional representation – increase turnout?³⁸ Would greater competitiveness in congressional, state, and local elections enhance turnout? Attention to these questions (and others that might be posed by social scientists) could well contribute to the revitalization of American political life.

³⁵ For legal and scholarly work on this topic, see bibliography available at http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc. See also: The Dementia Voting Project at <http://www.ups.upenn.edu/ad> (last accessed 02/22/05).

³⁶ For information on the evolution of turnout rates in the United States, see: “Turnout Exceeds Optimistic Predictions: More than 122 Million Vote.” *Committee for the Study of the American Electorate*. 14 January 2005. http://elections.ssrc.org/research/csae_2004_final_report.pdf, last accessed 02/22/05; McDonald, Michael P. “Every Eligible Voter Counts: Correctly Measuring American Turnout Rates.” *Brookings Institution Report*. 2004. <http://www.brookings.edu/views/papers/20040909mcdonald.pdf>, last accessed 02/22/05; McDonald, Michael P. and Samuel Popkin. “The Myth of the Vanishing Voter.” *American Political Science Review*. 95:4 (December 2001). See also: http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm (last accessed 02/22/05). For other literature on voter turnout, see http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc.

³⁷ These variations can be partially explained by mobilization efforts as well. Turnout in so-called “battleground states” – where the parties and advocacy groups poured the vast majority of resources – rose by 8.3% from 2000 to 2004, whereas other areas saw an increase of only 5.4% (Committee for the Study of the American Electorate [2005], p. 2).

³⁸ Douglas J. Amy and Mark N. Franklin have done some of the most recent work on this subject. See bibliography available at http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc.

I. The Electoral College

It is difficult to contemplate reforming the presidential election system without considering our nation's most unusual political institution, the Electoral College. Whether the United States ought to retain the Electoral College has been a matter of periodic public debate for almost two centuries. Since 2000, that debate has revived, with newspapers such as *The New York Times* now editorializing in favor of replacing the Electoral College with a national popular vote. Much of this debate involves political preferences, but there are several issues, at least, where research could illumine the advantages and disadvantages of retaining the Electoral College. Critics of the Electoral College, for example, have often hypothesized that the "unit rule" (mandating that all of a state's electoral votes go to the winner of the state's popular vote) depresses voter turnout. Is this true? Can it be demonstrated? On the other side, defenders of the Electoral College have steadfastly maintained that it serves to protect the interests of small states by requiring presidential candidates to pay greater attention to those states than would be the case with a national, popular election. In his recent study, *Why the Electoral College is Bad for America*, political scientist George Edwards argues, based on data from the 1990s and the 2000 election, that the small states, in fact, received no such advantage from the Electoral College.³⁹ Was this also true in 2004 – for instance, in terms of campaign visits, speeches, or advertising? A broader issue is whether there is any evidence that the Electoral College serves to protect or enhance the interests of minorities (as has sometimes been claimed).⁴⁰

J. Partisanship and Districting

Another institutional concern that has acquired increasing attention recently is the control of congressional (and state legislative) districting by state legislatures.⁴¹ This institutional arrangement can easily lead to partisan gerrymandering, a practice highlighted in Texas in 2003 when some legislators actually fled the state in an effort to prevent such a gerrymander.⁴² In a more bipartisan fashion, legislative control has made common the protection of incumbents. Indeed, thanks in good measure to districting practices, few electoral contests for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are genuinely competitive: in 2004, 34 were uncontested, and only four incumbents running for office failed to be reelected.⁴³ The protection of incumbents is

³⁹ Edwards, George C. *Why the Electoral College is Bad for America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004.

⁴⁰ In addition to Edwards' book, other recent studies of the Electoral College are included in the bibliography available at http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc.

⁴¹ See, for recent incidents of redistricting: Nagourney, Adam. "States See Growing Campaign to Change Redistricting Laws." *The New York Times*. 7 February 2005.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/07/politics/07reform.html>, last accessed 02/22/05.

For work on districting and partisanship, see bibliography available at

http://elections.ssrc.org/research/ssrc_bibliography_topic.doc.

⁴² Democrats in the state senate left in both May and July to prevent a quorum, and thus to stop a vote on the new districting plan (Graves, Rachel. "11 Dems in Exile Wary of Arrest; Want to Know Status of Round 3." *The Houston Chronicle*. 26 August 2003; Blumenthal, Ralph. "Return of Texas Democrats Sparks Celebration." *The New York Times*. 16 September 2003). The Republicans, of course, have had no monopoly on partisan gerrymandering, either in Texas or elsewhere.

⁴³ Full congressional election results from 2004 are available online at

<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/house/full.list/> (last accessed 02/22/05).

so widespread that critics often quip that elected representatives now chose their voters, rather than the other way around. The scarcity of closely contested congressional elections may also contribute to extremely low voter turnout in off-year elections.⁴⁴

Several states, including Iowa, Arizona, Hawaii, Washington, and New Jersey,⁴⁵ are now experimenting with new, less partisan means of drawing district boundaries for congress and state legislatures. Others, including California, Colorado, and Florida are considering doing so. Nonpartisan districting (through independent commissions or some other mechanism) appears to be a desirable reform, yet, once again, some empirical, comparative investigation is likely to be useful. How have such commissions best worked in those jurisdictions that have tried them? How do other nations determine the boundaries of legislative districts? What are the best institutional designs? What are the trade-offs among different designs?⁴⁶

IV. CONCLUSION

In the spring of 2001, at a hearing of the National Commission on Federal Election Reform, former President Jimmy Carter commented that a recent election in Mexico had been far better run – and had far fewer irregularities – than the 2000 election in the United States. Coming as it did from a former president of the United States and an experienced election observer, Carter's observation was a striking indictment of how flawed the American electoral apparatus had become.⁴⁷ Since the public shock of the disputed election of 2000, of course,

The 2002 elections fit a similar pattern. According to John H. Aldrich, "[I]n 2002, 398 House members ran for reelection, and only 16 were defeated, while a mere three out of 26 senators running for reelection lost. With a reelection rate of 88 percent for the Senate and 96 percent for the House, it is fair to say that congressional elections are not just candidate centered but incumbent centered as well" (Aldrich, John H. "Congressional Elections." <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/election04/congress.htm>, last accessed 02/22/05).

⁴⁴ If there is a correlation between turnout decline and non-competitive races, it could be established with district-level historical data. Some authors have already done work in this area. For example, see: Ansolabehere, Stephen, James M. Snyder, Jr., and Charles Stewart, III. "Candidate Positioning in U.S. House Elections." *American Journal of Political Science*. 45:1 (January 2001); Cook, Charles E. "The Parties Spring into Action." *The Washington Quarterly*. 26:2 (Spring 2003); Jackson, R. A. "The Mobilization of Congressional Electorates." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. 21:3 (August 1996); Renda, Lex. "The End of Midterm Decline? Congressional Elections in Historical Perspective." *Social Science History*. 27:2 (Summer 2003).

⁴⁵ Some localities in Massachusetts have approved initiatives recommending that districting be done by an independent body. The Center for Voting and Democracy catalogs articles on different states' redistricting plans at <http://www.fairvote.org/redistricting/reports/remanual/frames.htm> (last accessed 02/22/05). The National Conference of State Legislatures' website on nonpartisan redistricting best practices is also available at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legman/redistrict/com&alter.htm> (last accessed 02/22/05).

⁴⁶ Some analysis of existing models is available, but many are too new to have been thoroughly researched. For some recent work, see: McDonald, Michael P. "Enhancing Competitiveness in Redistricting." <http://elections.gmu.edu/enhancing.htm>, last accessed 02/22/05; "Redistricting Commissions and Alternatives to the Legislature Conducting Redistricting." *National Conference of State Legislatures*. <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legman/redistrict/com&alter.htm>, last accessed 02/22/05. A list of news resources on the Arizona and California redistricting debates are available, respectively, at <http://www.fairvote.org/redistricting/reports/remanual/aznews3.htm> and <http://www.fairvote.org/redistricting/reports/remanual/canews.htm> (last accessed 02/22/05).

⁴⁷ Former President Carter reiterated his sentiments in an opinion article that was originally published in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Carter, Jimmy. "Peru Can Give U.S. Lessons in How to Hold Elections." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. 22 April 2001. <http://www.cartercenter.org/doc140.htm>, last accessed 02/22/05.

many improvements have been made to our electoral system; but almost all close observers agree that a great deal more remains to be done.⁴⁸

The importance of shoring up democratic institutions and processes cannot be overstated at an historical moment when the American people seem sharply and deeply divided over many critical issues, both domestic and international. At a time of such divisions, it is essential that the people have complete confidence in the mechanisms through which leaders are elected and decisions made in a democracy. The 2004 election and its aftermath demonstrated that such confidence is not universal – and deservedly so. Procedural, organizational, legal, and technological problems are widespread, if not rampant, and some of them, at least, may not be curable with our current institutional configurations.

The urgency of these issues, of course, has international dimensions as well. At present, the United States is the world's only superpower, yet global public opinion suggests that we are distrusted more than we are admired. We often exert our power in the name of democracy, yet many people around the world are skeptical of our proclaimed intentions and values; critics of the United States, as they did during the Cold War, sometimes point to the flaws in our institutions as emblems of our insincerity. In the last 40 years, a remarkable number of nations has acquired or built democratic (or democratizing) governments, yet many of these regimes are fragile. Some of these new democracies (as well as traditional ones) have devised modern electoral systems that seem to perform better than our own, yet we as a nation seem reluctant to learn from them.

Against this backdrop, a call for a national, coordinated scholarly commitment to the study of elections, voting, and democracies seems wise. Understanding as best we can – in depth and in detail – how our political institutions are actually working and how they might best be reformed would appear to be a worthy cause, squarely in the finest tradition of engaged social science. Certainly, we recognize that there are limits to what the scholarly community can achieve: much will depend on the will and preferences of political leaders. Yet there are also limits to what political leaders and reform activists can accomplish in the absence of organized research and sustained intellectual debate.

⁴⁸ Support and opposition to specific electoral reforms often are based on beliefs about their short-term partisan effects. We encourage those contemplating change (and those in opposition to it) to adopt a longer time horizon and to keep in mind that what may help one side today might hurt it tomorrow. For example, the enfranchisement of blacks through the 15th Amendment was originally viewed as a way to help the Republican Party survive. For a historical database of the efforts this year to mandate electoral regulation and standardization, see *The New York Times* series "Making Votes Count" at <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/opinion/making-votes-count.html?pagewanted=all> (last accessed 02/22/05).