

STILL SEEKING A FAIR FLORIDA VOTE

By Jimmy Carter
The Washington Post

Monday 27 September 2004

After the debacle in Florida four years ago, former president Gerald Ford and I were asked to lead a blue-ribbon commission to recommend changes in the American electoral process. After months of concerted effort by a dedicated and bipartisan group of experts, we presented unanimous recommendations to the president and Congress. The government responded with the Help America Vote Act of October 2002. Unfortunately, however, many of the act's key provisions have not been implemented because of inadequate funding or political disputes.

The disturbing fact is that a repetition of the problems of 2000 now seems likely, even as many other nations are conducting elections that are internationally certified to be transparent, honest and fair.

The Carter Center has monitored more than 50 elections, all of them held under contentious, troubled or dangerous conditions. When I describe these activities, either in the United States or in foreign forums, the almost inevitable questions are: "Why don't you observe the election in Florida?" and "How do you explain the serious problems with elections there?"

The answer to the first question is that we can monitor only about five elections each year, and meeting crucial needs in other nations is our top priority. (Our most recent ones were in Venezuela and Indonesia, and the next will be in Mozambique.) A partial answer to the other question is that some basic international requirements for a fair election are missing in Florida.

The most significant of these requirements are:

- A nonpartisan electoral commission or a trusted and nonpartisan official who will be responsible for organizing and conducting the electoral process before, during and after the actual voting takes place. Although rarely perfect in their objectivity, such top administrators are at least subject to public scrutiny and responsible for the integrity of their decisions. Florida voting officials have proved to be highly partisan, brazenly violating a basic need for an unbiased and universally trusted authority to manage all elements of the electoral process.
- Uniformity in voting procedures, so that all citizens, regardless of their social or financial status, have equal assurance that their votes are cast in the same way and will be tabulated with equal accuracy. Modern technology is already in use that makes electronic voting possible, with accurate and almost immediate tabulation and with paper ballot printouts so all voters can have confidence in the integrity of the process. There is no reason these proven techniques, used overseas and in some U.S. states, could not be used in Florida.

It was obvious that in 2000 these basic standards were not met in Florida, and there are disturbing signs that once again, as we prepare for a presidential election, some of the state's leading officials hold strong political biases that prevent necessary reforms.

Four years ago, the top election official, Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris, was also the co-chair of the Bush-Cheney state campaign committee. The same strong bias has become evident in her successor, Glenda Hood, who was a highly partisan elector for George W. Bush in 2000. Several thousand ballots of African Americans were thrown out on technicalities in 2000, and a fumbling attempt has been made recently to disqualify 22,000 African Americans (likely Democrats), but only 61 Hispanics (likely Republicans), as alleged felons.

The top election official has also played a leading role in qualifying Ralph Nader as a candidate, knowing that two-thirds of his votes in the previous election came at the expense of Al Gore. She ordered Nader's name be included on absentee ballots even before the state Supreme Court ruled on the controversial issue.

Florida's governor, Jeb Bush, naturally a strong supporter of his brother, has taken no steps to correct these departures from principles of fair and equal treatment or to prevent them in the future.

It is unconscionable to perpetuate fraudulent or biased electoral practices in any nation. It is especially objectionable among us Americans, who have prided ourselves on setting a global example for pure democracy. With reforms unlikely at this late stage of the election, perhaps the only recourse will be to focus maximum public scrutiny on the suspicious process in Florida.

Former president Carter is chairman of the Carter Center in Atlanta.