

Testimony of  
Cecilia I. Martinez  
Executive Director  
The Reform Institute

Before the  
Committee on House Administration  
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on  
2008 Presidential Primaries and Caucuses: "What we've learned so far."

April 9, 2008

Chairman Brady, Ranking Member Ehlers, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee to discuss the lessons the Reform Institute has learned thus far this election season and to detail the issues we view pertinent for the upcoming general election.

The Institute is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) educational organization, representing a unique, independent voice working to strengthen the foundations of our democracy and build a resilient society. Achieving both goals requires free, fair and competitive elections that encourage the vigorous engagement of citizens in the process and promote trust in government. That is why the Institute has been a leading voice for reform in issues such as campaign finance, redistricting, ballot access and election administration.

The Reform Institute believes that providing multiple layers of information to voters on their polling location, registration status, and voter rights reduce the likelihood a voter is intentionally or unintentionally denied their right to vote. Employing advancements in telecommunications and information technology that are already well-integrated into our commercial and social activities will be essential to ensuring the active participation of voters in the political process. In addition, we strongly support policies that minimize voter intimidation and fraudulent behavior to ensure that every vote is counted accurately.

Based on data collected by a national voter hotline that has assisted voters during the presidential primary campaign, providing simple information to voters will remove a major impediment to the casting of ballots. Reforms in election administration should be based on principles such as (1) increased voter education and access to information, and (2) the adaptation and utilization of technologies developed by the private sector and already in use.

A key component of the Institute's efforts to improve the electoral process has been our active involvement in the 866-MyVote1 Consortium, which operates the 866-MyVote1 Voter Alert Line. The national voter assistance hotline has helped

hundreds of thousands of voters since its inception in the 2004 Presidential election. The hotline informs and empowers voters by providing information on poll locations, allowing voters to record messages reporting problems at the polls and connecting them to local election administrators.

The overwhelming response to the hotline and data collected by it demonstrate that providing better information to voters is essential to enhancing the conduct of elections and promoting confidence and participation in the process.

The lack of basic information – namely regarding polling place and registration status – is effectively creating serious barriers to voting by citizens across the country. This problem can and must be addressed by drawing on the innovation, collaboration and leadership that have often fueled progress in this nation.

Since the Consortium began assisting voters in 2004, lack of poll location information remains the largest barrier to casting a vote, and the percentage of calls to the Hotline regarding poll location have increased significantly from the 2004 Presidential election to the 2008 Presidential primaries. According to research reports published by the 866-MyVote1 Consortium, the preponderance of calls to the MyVote1 hotline during the 2004, 2006 & 2008 elections were from callers seeking to ascertain their polling location.

Election Year	% of total callers seeking poll location
2004 National Presidential Election	48%
2006 National Midterm Election	65%
2008 State Presidential Primaries (through April 4, 2008)	78%

*Based on calls to the MyVote1 Voter Alert Line*

Difficulties with voter registration are consistently the second most prevalent issue reported by voters. Registration-related grievances from callers included questions as to whether they were registered, in what jurisdiction they were registered in, and how to register or transfer their registration. According to the *MyVote1 National Election Report: Voice of the Electorate 2006*, which was prepared by the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania, twenty percent of calls in the 2006 national midterm election were from citizens complaining about registration difficulties, which accounted for the largest percentage of complaints to the hotline.

Calls to the 866-MyVote1 hotline so far during this year’s primary campaign mirror the 2004 and 2006 numbers when it comes to poll location and registration. In 2008 Presidential primaries, the hotline was operational in eleven states and logged thousands of calls from voters, most of whom (78%) were seeking their poll location.

Of the remaining calls, problems with voter registration remained the highest complaint reported by voters in 2008 so far. In fact, in many of the eleven early primary states where the hotline was operational, problems with voter registration occurred twice as often as any other complaint type.

As we prepare for a high-stakes election in November 2008, increasing voter education and access to information through existing technology must be a priority to ensure an orderly and fair election.

Increased voter education is a balance between the voter and elections officials. In the technology age that we live in, voters should view their civic education in part as consumers of political information, using the internet and other resources to educate themselves about the candidates, the issues, and the voting system. By the same token, the government has a responsibility to provide non-partisan voter education, information about voting rights, as well as operational tutorials on how to use voting machines.

There are some relatively simple steps that can be taken to improve voter access to critical information such as poll location and registration status. Given that approximately 82% of Americans have cell phones, voter assistance hotlines like the 866-MyVote1 national hotline are extremely useful for voters looking for their poll location on Election Day. Local election administrators can inform voters of their poll location utilizing several means of communication such as postcards, emails, text messages, and robo calls. Strategic public-private partnerships between election administrators and consumer providers such telephone and wireless companies, utility companies, and cable and Direct TV can greatly enhance the ability to reach voters. We must also encourage outreach by church and community groups to those less likely to be reached by advanced technologies.

Voters should not have any doubt concerning their registration status. Voters should be able to “track” their voter registration from when they fill-out the form, to when it is processed by their local elections official, much like the tracking system used by shipping companies like FedEx and UPS. Building a robust and effective system will require both enhanced education for election officials and knowledge on the part of voters as to their rights and responsibilities.

An important link in the information chain consists of the volunteers and officials manning the polls on Election Day. Many calls to the MyVote1 hotline during key primaries in this election season involved voters citing instances where poll workers misinformed voters about which party’s contest they were eligible to participate in and where they could vote.

There have also been many instances where poll workers were not sufficiently trained in operating new voting equipment. Providing front-line election workers with the information, support and training they need to assist voters must be a key component of enhancing voter access to information.

Improving voter access to basic information must be a cornerstone of efforts to improve election administration. The technology is there – we must encourage collaboration among federal, state and local elections officials, as well as with the private sector, to take advantage of innovative solutions such as the MyVote1 hotline and to develop systems that efficiently assist voters and enhance the voting process. Congress has a role to play in providing the leadership necessary to bring the relevant actors together and effectively exploiting technology. Citizen education and empowerment are one of the major pillars to building a resilient society. The Reform Institute and the 866-MyVote1 hotline are ready and able to assist in this critical effort. I look forward to any questions the Committee may have.