

[www.billnelson.senate.gov](http://www.billnelson.senate.gov)

June 6, 2008

Contact: Dan McLaughlin, ( 202 ) 224-1679

# Congress confronted with major election reform

## *Senator proposes to end Electoral College*

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** – A U.S. senator from a state known for election snafus today filed a package of reforms to change national voting procedures, including proposals to abolish the Electoral College in favor of direct popular election of the president and to allow voters, not party bosses, to select presidential candidates.

The legislation, by Florida Democrat Bill Nelson, comes at the end of a long primary season in which major rules disputes threatened to exclude Florida and Michigan from having a say in the selection of a Democratic presidential nominee. It could be the opening bid in the first significant attempt in Congress to overhaul the core of the presidential election and primary systems since then-Indiana Sen. Birch Bayh narrowly lost two separate tries to abolish the Electoral College in 1970 and 1979.

Nelson said it's time for Congress to reconsider such a direct election plan, noting that just eight years ago a president was elected with only a minority of the popular vote. He also cited Florida and Michigan's brush this year with having their primary results dismissed in a dispute with political party officials over election dates.

"It's time for Congress to really give Americans the power of one-person, one-vote, instead of the political machinery selecting candidates and electing our president," said Nelson, an outspoken advocate of election reform since suing his party last year over its initial refusal to count Florida's 2008 Democratic presidential primary.

A centerpiece of Nelson's three-part initiative is the proposed constitutional amendment to abolish the 18th-century Electoral College, plus the establishment of regional primaries and other reforms. His principal argument for getting rid of the Electoral College is the system permits a candidate with fewer votes nationally to win the presidency by capturing narrow victories in big states.

In 2000, George W. Bush actually lost the nationwide popular election to Al Gore by nearly 544,000 votes, yet won the presidency in a Supreme Court showdown over Florida's Electoral College votes that hinged on far fewer disputed state ballots.

The second part of Nelson's initiative, which he previously filed with Michigan Democrat Carl Levin, gives voters more say than political party bosses in picking the presidential candidates. It does so by establishing six rotating, interregional primaries beginning in March and ending in June every four years. It pairs large and small states into six different regions; and, the states in each region take turns

going first — removing exclusive power from the nation's first primary and caucus states, New Hampshire and South Carolina, and Iowa and Nevada, respectively. U.S. Rep Sander Levin has been a champion of a companion regional-primary measure the House.

Under the third part of Nelson's broader election plan, all voters would get to vote early and could cast absentee ballots on demand - something a number of states already allow. Also, all voting machines would have to produce a paper trail, and states that develop mail-in balloting would be eligible for federal grants.

The package is drawing positive reaction from several voting rights groups that seek to make election reform a national priority, among them, WhyTuesday?, which opposes inconvenient voting on Tuesdays.

"We applaud Sen. Nelson for taking a bold step, which not many have in Washington: acknowledging that our voting system is broken," said Norman Ornstein, a leading constitutional scholar and board member of the nonprofit group. "Given that American voter participation ranks near the bottom of all countries, we encourage other members of Congress to join in an open and honest debate about making voting as accessible, reliable, and secure as possible."

Various voters' rights groups were consulted on the legislation – called the One Person, One Vote Initiative - including WhyTuesday and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization formed at the request of President John F. Kennedy.

The next step in the process, Nelson said, is to gain support from enough lawmakers, while also pushing hard for congressional hearings.

## One Person, One Vote Initiative

[www.billnelson.senate.gov](http://www.billnelson.senate.gov)

### I. A resolution providing for the direct election of the president:

*Abolish the Electoral College:* A resolution for a constitutional amendment will be filed to abolish the Electoral College and allow direct election of the president by popular vote. If the principle of one person, one vote is to mean anything, the candidate who wins a majority of the votes should win the presidency; or,

### II. A bill providing for the voters' selection of presidential candidates:

*Establish rotating primaries:* The 2008 election has demonstrated our primary system is broken. This legislation will give both large and small states a fair say in selecting presidential nominees, and will do away with unrepresentative caucuses controlled by party bosses. It divides the nation into six regions and establishes six primary dates beginning in March and ending in June. On each of the six dates, states in each region of the country will be represented on a rotating basis.

### **III. A bill making it easier for everyone to vote:**

***Allow nationwide early voting:*** Restricting voting to the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November unduly restricts many voters from getting to the polls. The bill will take what has been instituted successfully in Florida – early voting – and expand it to cover the entire nation, so that voters can go to a designated polling place before Election Day and cast their vote. [[www.whytuesday.org](http://www.whytuesday.org) ]

***Allow absentee ballot on demand:*** Some states still require a voter attest to an inability to get to the polls on Election Day in order to obtain an absentee ballot. The legislation would remove this barrier to voting to impose a nationwide requirement that states issue qualified voters an absentee ballot on demand.

***Encourage vote-by-mail:*** The bill would provide grants to jurisdictions that wish to institute pilot programs for full-fledged vote-by-mail elections, based on Oregon's successful model. Any such pilot program would need to contain adequate safeguards to ensure full inclusion of all voters regardless of race, language, or disability, and guard against fraud.

***Require vote verification:*** The legislation takes nationwide the voting technology reforms instituted last year in Florida. It would require there be a verifiable paper ballot to accompany every vote that is cast, which now is required in Florida and in several other states.