

APRIL 29, 2002

**SCHAKOWSKY ADDRESSES COUNCIL ON FOUNDATIONS 2002 ANNUAL  
CONFERENCE**

**DEMOCRACY AFTER FLORIDA: STATE STRATEGIES TO EXPAND PARTICIPATION IN  
PUBLIC LIFE**

**CHICAGO, IL -- I am honored to be here today with so many distinguished panelists, and to be a part of this year's conference: "Democracy After Florida: State Strategies To Expand Participation in Public Life." I am grateful for the efforts that you are undertaking every day to engage all Americans in their government, so that they can actively shape the future of their nation. Thank you for all that you do.**

**Let me begin by making it very clear: The outcome of the 2000 election would have been different if every vote cast had been counted and no voter was denied their constitutional right to vote. Tens of thousands of ballots from minority districts were thrown out; legal and lawful voters were turned away on election day; registered voters were illegally purged from the rolls.**

**Now, more than a year later, I strongly view the frustration, anger, and resentment felt by voters, and non-voters alike, throughout the nation as a positive opportunity. It is an occasion to reengage the public in the political process, not just on the federal or presidential level, but on state and local issues, and to remind them that practically every aspect of their life is tied to decisions being made by elected officials in every state capitols and on Capitol Hill.**

**I am the Vice Chair of the Democratic Caucus Special Committee on Election Reform. The Committee has held public forums in major cities across the country, including Chicago. We heard from disenfranchised voters, local elected officials, and community organizers about what really happened on Election Day 2000. We know that history is doomed to repeat itself, unless we are serious about taking action today to ensure fair and equitable elections in the future. I believe we can reach that goal by, first, expanding our nationwide grassroots voter registration drives. We have made great strides in the past, including Motor Voter. After a long struggle, which I am certain many of you were engaged in, citizens are allowed to register to vote at the same time they apply for their driver's license. We've also seen states adopt same day registration and registration by mail. I am particularly impressed by the efforts to register hard to reach voters like new citizens, transit voters, and low income workers.**

**But I know that you share my concerns that 36% of eligible African American voters, 66% of Hispanics, and 94% of young people are not registered to vote. And that only 40% of low income and unemployed voters are registered -- those are the same citizens whose lives are directly impacted by decisions made in city council, state houses, and**

**Congress. By not voting, the likelihood grows that stronger that those elected without these votes will fail to address their concerns.**

**I know that registering voters is a fight we fight every day, but since Florida 2000, great organizations like the NAACP and others have redoubled their efforts to register young people, people of color, and working people. There are great models in place today to register new citizens and efforts spearheaded to reach potential voters in L stops, in grocery stores, on the street, wherever and whenever. You are out there reminding potential voters every day that they can't go to the ball if they're not invited, and that their registration card is their ticket into the voting booth.**

**Second, we must expand our voter education initiatives. Without voter education, turnout on Election Day will still hover around 50%. That's a failing grade. No matter how many registration cards are filled out, the voters must make the connection that their vote actually matters; the voters must rise above their suspicions of government, and believe that, yes, I am voting for stronger education, better services, access to healthcare and for someone who represents my values and not those of the special interests.**

**Lani Guinier in her book "The Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Government" writes about Milagros Robledo, a Latino voter from Philadelphia. He says:**

**"After going through this whole thing, I now really know the value of my vote. It means nothing to me, and it means a lot to the politicians."**

**Mr. Robledo should not be made to feel that his vote is worthless; that his vote means less than others; that his vote has no value. He should be made to feel that his government, his elected officials will represent his interests and that he has the same rights as the any corporate board member. But that only happens if he votes.**

**Finally, once a voter is registered and educated, we need to make sure that the voter's vote is counted. Federal action to reform our election system and to ensure that the protections spelled out in the National Voting Rights Act are carried is just as important as voter registration and education. Congress is in the process of setting national minimum standards to seriously address the severe deficiencies that exist in today's voting procedures and technologies and ensure that no voter is turned away, shut out, or discriminated against on election day. As you know, the House and Senate each passed election reform legislation. Both bills contain measures I support such as provisional voting requirements, federal funds for new voting equipment, voter and poll worker education. However, I join many civil rights and minority interests organizations in their concerns that the photo ID requirement contained in the Senate bill, while scaled back from its original version, still may have a "chilling effect on low income voters," (NAACP). I am also concerned that the standards in the House bill do not go far enough to ensure that all voters with disabilities have access to the polls and to guarantee that all machines notify voters of undervotes and overvotes. Furthermore, the legislation does not require states to provide adequate voting machinery to poor and minority**

**districts.**

**I hope that Congress will deliver a meaningful and powerful election reform bill. If we fail to take charge and bring about real reforms, votes will not be counted and minority voters will be turned away from the polling place. They will be unfairly targeted, and they will not be allowed to fully exercise their constitutional rights. And without action, persons with disabilities will continue to be denied access to the polling place or will be denied the privacy guaranteed to others.**

**State efforts to expand voter participation have helped lead the way to federal reforms. But state advocacy organizations and state elected officials have also understood that participation does not end in the voting booth.**

**Many voters are excited about voting. Remember the first time that you voted. For many of us, this was not just about being an adult - it was being part of what we had learned in civics classes is an American tradition and responsibility. Now, many of us - even those of us who make a living out of politics - may wonder whether our vote really matters, whether we can make a difference in a system that seems geared to the special interests instead of the public interest.**

**This year, at long last, Congress passed legislation banning soft money donations to federal political parties. This is just one step in getting big money out of politics. But more steps are needed.**

**That is why groups like Public Campaign are fighting to win Clean Elections, Clean Money campaign finance reform and why victories in Maine and Arizona and Massachusetts were won with the support of so many allies.**

**Voting is the most fundamental component of political participation. But it is not the only one. We need people to be involved not just at election time but between elections - when decisions are made that effect their lives and their future. Electoral reform and campaign finance reform together will encourage that participation by allowing the will of the people - not the demands of corporations - to influence policy.**

**As a federal legislator, I am committed to winning these changes at the national level. And, as a federal legislator, I can tell you that federal action is spurred, motivated and made more possible by victories at the state level. In many instances, it is true: if the states lead, the federal government will follow.**