

*Learning from the Election***Crisis or Civic Education**

by Sharon Priest



Americans woke up on November 8, 2000 not knowing who had been elected President. It was all the more surprising, as we are used to living in the instant-information age. Many people thought we had an election crisis. I think not. The American Heritage Dictionary defines crisis as “an unstable condition in political, international, or economic affairs in which an abrupt or decisive change is impending.” Americans believe

one of the greatest things about our country is the peaceful transition we have in our leadership. What we had was a real-life civics lesson. We learned that elections don't just happen – there are many people involved. For example, there are 7,000 jurisdictions; 700,000 voting machines; 22,000 election officials; 1.4 million poll workers; and over 100 million voters. We also learned that there are imperfections in the voting system.

The National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) has worked for years to perfect election-laws by adopting voluntary best practices on a state-by-state basis. It was no coincidence that the nation's Secretaries were the first after the 2000 elections to release a resolution addressing the broad issues surrounding elections. There are a total of 16 points in the resolution addressing the steps that the state, local, and federal governments should take to ensure voters are informed, confident, and satisfied.

In the National Association of Secretaries of State Election Reform Resolution, the nation's Secretaries recommend that the state-and-local governments continue to work to:

1. Ensure non-discriminatory equal access to the elections system for all voters, including elderly, disabled, minority, military, and overseas citizens;
2. Encourage the adoption and enforcement of election day rules and procedures to ensure equal treatment of all voters;
3. Modernize the voting process as necessary, including voting machines, equipment, voting technologies and systems and implement well-defined, consistent standards for what counts as a vote throughout the election process ensuring accurate vote counts and minimal voter error;
4. Encourage states to adopt uniform state standards and procedures for both recounts and contested elections, in order to ensure that each vote is counted and to provide public confidence in the election results;
5. Provide elections officials with increased funding to implement the recommendations of this resolution;
6. Conduct aggressive voter education and broad-based outreach programs;

7. Expand poll worker recruitment and training programs by adopting the innovative practices of other states and localities, with the ultimate goal of providing a satisfactory election day experience for all voters;

8. Maintain accurate voter registration rolls with a system of intergovernmental cooperation and communication;

9. Enhance the integrity and timeliness of absentee ballot procedures;

10. Adopt and adhere to the Voluntary Federal Voting Systems Standards for Voting Systems;

11. Provide for continuous training and certification for election officials; and

12. Collect data and election information on a regular and consistent basis to provide a nexus for public consumption and systemic improvements.

...there are 7,000 jurisdictions;
700,000 voting machines; 22,000 election
officials; 1.4 million poll workers;
and over 100 million voters.

NASS further recommends that Congress:

1. Fully fund the continuous update of the Federal Voting Systems Standards developed in consensus with state and local election officials;

2. Fund the development of voluntary management practices standards for each voting system;

3. Promote intergovernmental cooperation and communication among state and local elections officials to facilitate the maintenance of accurate voter registration rolls;

4. Provide funding to the States to implement the state and local recommendations of this resolution.

The refinement of the preceding sixteen points from general to specific criteria for implementation will be announced this summer. Our goal in developing the specific criteria is to offer them for voluntary adoption by each of our States. The nation's Secretaries embrace the opportunity for election reform and appreciate the public attention. Never before have people been so interested in the election process. Their interest will help all of us, at every level of government, prioritize needs and work together. There has been no crisis, but we have all learned valuable lessons; and I hope the level of interest in elections will continue civic education in our country.

Sharon Priest is the Arkansas Secretary of State and also serves as President of the National Association of Secretaries of State. Secretary Priest chaired the ten-member National Election Standards Task Force.