

## **“Civil Rights Commission Revisits Florida and Hears Warnings of Future Election Problems”**

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**‘MIAMI, Fla.** – While election reform might have transcended party politics in Congress and many state legislatures, it can still roil deep partisan tensions here.

Local Democratic legislators and election officials, along with representatives from left-leaning civil rights groups, warned the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights last week at a hearing in downtown Miami that there would be more problems for Florida in November’s election because state Republicans had not done enough to fix the many problems that plagued the disputed 2000 presidential election.

Gov. Jeb Bush and Secretary of State Katherine Harris, both Republicans, responded one day later by attacking the credibility of the liberal-majority commission and its chairwoman, Mary Frances Berry.

Clearly, Florida Democrats’ outrage at the administration of the 2000 race has yet to dissipate. If the warnings from the panelists at last week’s commission hearing are borne out in the September primary and November general elections, that anger may seethe for some time to come.

Those that did show up said essentially the same thing: The legislature and the governor did act in some areas, but they didn’t go far enough. Citing an inadequate definition of provisional balloting, a lack of voter education, and a new and still untested statewide voter file, combined with the usual problems associated with redistricting, most witnesses testified that the 2002 elections are likely to be troublesome again for Florida voters, particularly racial and language minorities.

“I know that there’s going to be mass confusion on Election Day,” State Sen. Kendrick Meek (D-Miami) said. “We’re taking the victim back to the scene of the crime. The only good thing I can see we have done [since 2000] is get rid of the punch cards.”

During his testimony, Ion Sancho, the Democratic supervisor of elections for Leon County (home to state capital Tallahassee), evaluated how the state had addressed the recommendations of the governor's 2001 election reform task force. He issued a mixed bag of grades.

While praising the state for adopting new voting technology and developing a voters' bill of rights to be posted at polling places, he said the state failed to "put people first," as the state report called for.

"There is no accountability [for counties' voter education efforts]," Sancho said. "You have to train the voter. You have to tell them what you can't do in order to not lose your vote."

Several told the commission of the potential problems with the state's new provisional balloting, which is limited to use by voters who show up at the correct precinct on Election Day. State Democrats wanted voters to be able to cast a provisional ballot from any precinct in that voter's home county.

"I call Florida election reform 'the good, the bad and the ugly.' The ugly is provisional ballots," State Rep. Christopher Smith (D-Ft. Lauderdale) said. "If you're not in the right precinct, your vote doesn't count."

Added Sancho, "The Florida House did not want anything but the most restrictive form of provisional ballots. Twenty-five percent of precincts in 2002 won't even have existed in 2000. They completely ignored the impact of [redistricting]."

Berry said last year's election package "has some good provisions," but added it was "discouraging to hear concerns" from witnesses about the state's actions on provisional balloting and assistance for language minorities.

"I'm hoping that a train wreck doesn't happen on primary day," she said."