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Thank you for the opportunity to address the Commission and to present the views of the League of Women Voters. We look forward to working with you in examining the problems with U.S. elections and exploring how best to create a system that is worthy of our great democracy.

For more than 85 years, the League of Women Voters has worked to educate the American electorate and to make voting more accessible for all. We believe strongly that voting is the most fundamental right of citizens in a democracy. We also believe that government at all levels has an obligation to make certain that all eligible Americans who want to vote are able to do so freely and efficiently – and with full confidence that their votes will be counted as they intended.

This is the ideal, the system we aim for. But, right now, we are not close to reaching that goal. The problems we witnessed in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections are familiar to all of us: poorly designed ballots, antiquated equipment and technology failures, rampant errors in voter registration processes, unaccommodating and inaccessible polling places, differences in the ways ballots are counted, and, in 2004, lines to vote in some places that would rival the line for tickets to see a U2 concert or the Rolling Stones.

None of these is an isolated problem. They are not things we can fix with band-aid-type solutions. Rather, these problems are symptoms of a larger illness.

Years of inattention and, yes, complacency at all levels of government have given us an election management system that is not up to the task we ask it to do. According to the Election Center, there are 7,000 different jurisdictions in this country responsible for overseeing 200,000 polling sites. The job of managing this system falls to 18,000 paid elections staff and 1.4 million poll workers, most of whom receive just two to three hours of training, if that.

Poll workers and election officials in this country do a remarkable and vitally important job. But the system is failing them just as it is failing the voters.

The Help America Vote Act was an important achievement. But it is only a first step toward election reform, and it is a step that has not yet been completed. Some have suggested that the law should be amended now to address some of the problems we saw in 2004. But, in the League's view, this would be comparable to attempting to change the tires on a moving car.

Rather, the League believes the Help America Vote Act should be fully implemented while we look more closely at the next steps that need to be taken to bring our election system

back to health. It is these next steps that I want to talk about today, because we believe they should be central to the Commission's work.

We have identified four next steps for your consideration: First, the professionalization of election management in this country; second, the adoption of a "service" focus that places the voter at the center of the election system; third, a wide-ranging research and development effort to improve every aspect of elections; and fourth, substantial, long-term federal funding so the system can work effectively for everyone. The remainder of my remarks will focus on each of these areas in greater detail.

The first step we recommend is professionalization of election management. Why were long lines such a problem in 2004? Why did people in many cases have to wait four, five, six, even 10 hours to vote? Well, in some places the problems were as basic as workers being unable to find voters' names on alphabetical lists in a timely manner. In other places, voting machines were there but were not turned on. In still other areas, there were insufficient machines or workers.

Election administration is not rocket science and it is not computer science. It is basic management. Once again, we have no doubt that poll workers and election officials around the country are dedicated, competent and committed. The problem is that we are putting them out there on Election Day without the resources, the training or the equipment they need.

The current, decentralized approach to managing and organizing our far-flung system of people and polling places is an invitation to disaster. In order to professionalize this system, we need uniform standards, training to the standards, and accountability. We need to be clear what the jobs of all the different players should be, and how to make sure that everyone, from the volunteer poll worker to the chief election official, can contribute in a positive way. We cannot afford to continue situations where ambiguous responsibility means a lack of accountability.

Professionalization also means reassessing the role of federal and state governments in setting standards and providing oversight and guidance. It means rethinking how we recruit and train poll workers, especially because we now depend on an aging volunteer workforce. And it means reimagining the polling place — today, we're working with a 19th Century model, but imposing 21st Century expectations upon it.

What does it mean to reimagine the polling place? It means taking a closer look at innovations like those under way in Larimer County, Colorado. On Election Day 2004, Larimer County voters were free to vote in any of 31 "Vote Centers" throughout the county. Each of the centers was a well-staffed, full-service polling place with ample parking and with accessibility for voters with disabilities. Before the advent of Vote Centers in 2003, the county operated polling places in 143 precincts and had to scramble to find 1,000 poll workers. With Vote Centers, the county needs half that many, meaning it can be more selective while providing better, more focused training.

This is just one example of what I call "thinking outside the ballot box." By changing the way the polling place is organized, Larimer County has been able to set standards and achieve those standards in serving voters

This brings me to the second step we urge the Commission to consider as a way of strengthening our election system. We need to put the "service" back in "voter service." Voters in Larimer County apparently love their Vote Centers. It is easy to see why. These are places where people are treated like customers. Vote Centers are designed from the bottom up to be convenient, accessible and efficient.

How long would a fast food chain survive if its workers regularly allowed long lines to form without opening up more registers? How long would it survive if employees didn't help customers who had questions or who had problems navigating the system?

This is how the American election system works today for far too many voters. Somewhere along the line, we forgot that government has a responsibility to help voters, that voting should not be an inconvenience for people, and that the voter – the customer – should come first.

This is a problem that starts long before Election Day. The American system of voter registration seems deliberately designed to exclude and inconvenience eligible voters. We need a registration system that provides for orderly administration and assures the integrity of the vote. But we also need a registration system that ensures access and convenience for all who are eligible.

Americans had problems with voter registration in 2004, just as they have had for years. Registration through the DMV, public assistance and disability agencies has not been fully implemented, even though the National Voter Registration Act, known as "motor voter," has required such registration opportunities since 1995. In 2004, we saw that states didn't have uniform policies for accepting or rejecting registration applications, leading to confusion for voters and local officials alike. In some cases, the sheer volume of last minute voter registration applications led to processing errors.

That is not service. A business that treated its customers in this way would not last very long. And it is not just registration; it is also the way in which we design and administer fail-safe systems such as provisional ballots. Yes, provisional voting enabled more than a million voters to have their votes counted — people who might not have had a chance to vote otherwise. But a recent electionline.org study revealed enormous variations in the processes used to verify and count provisional ballots — some states counted as few as six percent. The mere fact that so many eligible voters showed up to vote only to find that their names were not on the rolls is just one more indication of a registration system that has failed to serve the voters.

The advent of statewide voter registration databases under the Help America Vote Act should assist in resolving some of these registration problems. But they are no panacea

and, as you know, many states already are behind in getting their databases up and running. In addition, there is little agreement about how a good database system should work. The rules that will govern the operation of statewide databases could easily result in additional disenfranchisement, or alternatively, could serve voters by streamlining and improving registration practices.

Statewide databases should do more than produce a long list. They should create statewide election management systems, from voter registration to Election Day management. They should simplify procedures and provide accountability. Statewide databases should have uniform, transparent, accurate and secure mechanisms for adding people's names to the registration list – and for removing them as well. Right now, too many voters are erroneously purged from the rolls. We can do better than that – and we must.

We've asked experts about the problems involved in setting up effective statewide databases, and they say it is not a hard thing to do, technically. We asked, then, why there is such controversy and difficulty. The answer: "legacy systems and legacy thinking." As is the case in so many other areas of election administration, we need to facilitate a transition to new systems and new ways of thinking – and we need to start that transition now.

Another step toward accommodating the needs of voters is the use of early voting in many jurisdictions. This provides an important convenience to the voter, while keeping the benefits of in-person voting and taking pressure off the polling place on Election Day. We believe that jurisdictions should move toward more uniform use of early voting.

This brings me to the third step that the League of Women Voters believes will help restore the health of this country's election system. We need to launch a wide-ranging research and development effort to apply 21st Century systems and technologies to the election process. And we need to engage our nation's colleges and universities in this important cause.

The redesign of polling place operations to accommodate modern technology would clearly benefit from additional research and development. The advent of statewide computerized voter databases will bring significant changes that must be carefully designed and managed. The process of change in election management is ongoing, and continued research and development must be part of that process.

Let me talk for a moment about voting equipment. Compared to the equipment purchased 30 and 40 years ago, the voting systems of today are much improved. And that is a good thing. But still, we are not yet at a point where the equipment fully meets all our goals. We need improvements in ballot design and in the interface between the voter and the machine, to ensure that every voter can properly operate the system. We need improvements in error rates, to ensure that voting systems properly record the voter's intent, without regard to education level, geographic district, income, literacy or disability. We need to look at which systems hold the greatest promise, and which are nearing a technological dead end.

Reports suggest there are 18 million Americans of voting-age population with limited English proficiency. Thirty-six million of us have disabilities. And I do not need to remind you that all of us are getting older – and the simple act of reading a touchscreen or a paper ballot is often not so simple any more. Voting machines need to be designed so that as many Americans as possible can use them without requiring special assistance. This gets to my earlier point about voter service. To the extent that we create technologies and systems that make voting easier for more people, then we can reduce Election Day bottlenecks and help things run more smoothly.

It is also important that voting systems can be easily and properly operated by poll workers. We need to assure that technology can be properly managed during the processes of setting up, taking down, operating and tabulating.

But new technologies cannot be developed without clear standards that are enforced. Here I am talking about performance standards, not design standards. Researchers and engineers need to know what goals we are trying to meet with new technologies. They need to know what will be expected of voting systems in terms of performance. Design standards can stifle technological development and creativity, but performance standards provide a mechanism for encouraging new solutions to meet fundamental goals.

The League of Women Voters has stated that voting technologies need to meet four criteria. They must be secure, accurate, recountable, and accessible. The term "recountable" is not a code word for paper trail, indeed, the League's stand is based on the understanding that voting technology is developing and that continued technological innovation is needed. Right now, not all voting systems fully meet all these goals. Many, in fact, trade one goal against another. We need to further develop technologies through a much more serious R&D commitment so that we can use the best possible systems.

One model for such an effort is the work of the Center for Election Systems at Kennesaw State University in Georgia. With funding from the state government, the center develops standards for voting technology used in the state and provides an array of other services, including testing all election equipment, providing training, and building databases and ballots for many counties.

This is an example of an academic institution joining with government to solve problems in election administration, rather than merely pointing out what is wrong. And it shows what can happen when a state takes seriously its obligation to bring standards and uniformity to elections and voting – so that all voters can know they are being served equally and fairly.

Another example is the work by the Caltech / MIT project, which has provided important information both about voting processes and the technologies involved, with an eye toward real-world improvements that will improve the accuracy, security and accessibility of voting. If every state were able to have a research and development effort like that by Kennesaw State or the Caltech /MIT project, we could be assured of constant improvements in our election systems.

But, once again, the states cannot do this alone. We need the federal government to establish goals, set performance standards and fund research on new voting and management technologies.

When John F. Kennedy challenged the nation to launch a human mission to the moon, he did not specify how it had to happen or the exact technologies involved. He set a goal, and he committed significant government funds to achieving that goal. We need to follow that same approach – an Apollo-like project to improve our election systems and protect our democracy.

This leads me to the fourth and final step that is needed to bring our election system back to health. We cannot move forward on any of the other steps I have talked about – professionalization, service, or research and development – without a substantial and sustained investment on the part of the federal government. States need to make significant investments as well, but the federal government must take the lead. We need to get real about the resources that are required to run elections in a manner that is consistent with this nation's democratic ideals.

If you look at the problems I have discussed today – including overwhelmed polling places, the lack of training, registration problems and insufficient technologies – a consistent theme is the lack of resources to do the job right. You get what you pay for. And right now, we are paying the price for our miserly approach to the administration of elections. And it is a price measured not in dollars but in Americans' declining faith that the system will serve their interests fairly and efficiently.

In 2004, anyone who was watching the news could have told you that significant numbers of voters would turn out on Election Day. We knew what was coming – and we knew it well in advance. But still, there were not enough machines in place or enough trained poll workers to go around. And we did not have the voter registration, back-up and emergency response systems we needed to manage and process all those who wanted to exercise their right to vote.

Today's decentralized system of election administration, based as it is on local funding, simply is not equipped to support the improvements and the advances we need. The Help America Vote Act, with its one-time infusion of funds, will help. But we need continued, permanent federal funding, with associated oversight, to make the transition to a 21st Century system that delivers on the promise of efficiency, security, accessibility and fairness.

With democracy gaining hold in new places throughout the world, it is time to ensure that the American election system can be held up as a model. We wish the Commission the best as you explore solutions in all of these areas, and we hope you will view the League of Women Voters as a resource in your continuing work.

Thank you very much.