

PRESS RELEASE

Congressman John Conyers, Jr.

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STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN JOHN CONYERS, JR. ON PASSAGE OF S. 565, EQUAL PROTECTION VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 2002

Congressman John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Committee issued the following statement regarding the passage of S.565, the "Equal Protection of Voting Rights Act of 2002":

"In 2000, our nation was faced with an election contest that threatened our sense of democracy. American citizens were deprived of their most basic right, the right to vote, and as a result we suffered through two months of uncertainty and confusion.

On this historic day, the passage of the S. 565, The Equal Protection Voting Rights Act of 2002, puts us one step closer to a giant leap in voting rights for all Americans. Senators Dodd and Daschle deserve the praise of the citizens of this nation for moving this issue forward. Unlike the timid reform bill passed by the House, this bill makes the promise of the most fundamental right of citizenship, the right to vote, a reality for disabled voters and language minorities. Perhaps most importantly, it would guarantee that the punchcard machines that disenfranchised thousands of poor and minority voters are discarded in the dustbin of history.

To some, in the wake of September 11, the urgency to pass election reform has lapsed and questions about the legitimacy of President Bush's election have passed. But to the elderly who were ripped off by butterfly ballots, language minorities who were denied their legal right to translation services and African-Americans who were disenfranchised and intimidated, the cause lives on.

The conference committee will be faced with a difficult task in these following weeks. Conference members must reconcile the House bill and the Senate bill into a law that will shape America's elections for years to come. On the one hand, we have proposals that, for the first time in our nation's history, would allow states to opt out of voting rights legislation, to opt out of providing fundamental guarantees that every vote cast will be counted. On the other hand, we have comprehensive election reform that would provide minimal guarantees to every voter, black or white, poor or rich, old or young. Every individual with a disability should be allowed to vote with privacy and independence. This should not be optional. When it comes to election reform, opt out is a cop out.

Election reform is still the most important issue facing our nation. And we must do all that we can to pass out of the conference committee legislation to address the serious problems plaguing our election system. The legislation passed by the Senate is poised to do so but we have a lot of work ahead of us to realize that reality. Let's forge ahead and do what we can to assure election reform law that truly guarantees the right to vote for all Americans."