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NEWS UPDATE - Monday, February 05, 2001

SUMMARY

In the News...

- *MONEY IN POLITICS*: Roll Call reports on Senate Republicans actively courting K Street lobbyists to support their efforts on a variety of corporate-backed efforts. on a variety of issues
- *ELECTORAL REFORM*: The Wall Street Journal reports that partisan rancor might derail efforts to enact real electoral reform after the Florida debacle. ELECTORAL REFORM reports on “moderates” marshalling their forces
- *ENERGY*: The Wall Street Journal reports that a bipartisan group of Western governors – a majority of whom are Republicans - are calling for price caps on electric rates in the face of the ongoing energy crisis. The article notes how interesting it is to see Republicans, who normally zealously support deregulation, are calling for price caps and more action out of the Bush White House.
- *PEACETIME DEFENSE BUILDUP*: CNN reports on Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice expressing their strong commitment to a multibillion dollar, scientifically untested missile defense system – conveniently supported by major industry looking to get a piece of the action.
- *ENVIRONMENT*: CNN reports that in one of her first public statements after being appointed Interior Secretary, Gale Norton indicated that she would explore drilling for oil off the coast of California after the environmental moratorium was lifted in 2012. She also asserted – without factual support – that drilling in Alaska “would not harm the environment.”

From the Editorial Pages...

- *WASHINGTON POST* editorial board writes that the debate over energy should not be only over the supply and demand of oil. “America cannot drill its way out of ties to the world oil market,” the editorial states, “To reduce dependence on foreign oil requires reducing dependence on oil in general, through lowered consumption or expansion of other energy sources.”
- *NEW YORK TIMES* editorial board urges Congress to resist attempts to enact a “quick fix” to the nation’s voting technology problems and take the necessary methodical steps to enact real reform.

Quote of the Day...

"Talk about having a civil tone of discourse and talk about having an agenda that deals with education reform, Medicare and tax reform. I'll answer some questions and I'm going to head home and take a nap."

- *President George W. Bush when asked what he would say at the Democratic House Retreat (NY Times, 2/5)*

In the News on February 5, 2001

Senate Republicans Looking To Strengthen Their Ties to K Street

Roll Call

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. - Senate Republicans returning to Capitol Hill this week from a four-day retreat are ready to launch an aggressive effort designed to strengthen their ties to K Street while also reaching out to groups that have not been aligned with the GOP in the past.

This outreach offensive is viewed as crucial to helping President Bush pass his legislative agenda in a Congress that Republicans rule by the thinnest of margins, GOP Senators and top aides familiar with the program's blueprint said.

"I think it's important for us to use all of the interests represented in Washington as communications vehicles" in pressing for the Bush agenda, GOP Conference Chairman Rick Santorum (Pa.) said last week. "All of them communicate to their members and to their associations." He cited as an example the securities industry association, which has "publications everyone in the industry reads, to the extent we haven't effectively utilized that medium. I think it is to our detriment, so I think it is important to develop good relationships so we can communicate."

This weekend's retreat, Santorum said, would allow Republicans to arrive at some consensus on what the message is in coordinating [communication strategy with] the House and the White House. "We are not going to finish that discussion this weekend, but we are going to begin that discussion."

Conference Vice Chairwoman Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) is working with Santorum to head up the initiative. "We are trying to do outreach to the business community and minority groups, and we hopefully are going to be reaching out to diverse groups of interest," said Hutchison, who confirmed that the effort would extend to "groups that are not traditionally Republican, because we want more input, and we think it is healthy to have it."

The move represents the first time the Senate Republican leadership has undertaken an outreach effort of this magnitude to engage K Street on several issues simultaneously, lobbyists said. Senate Republican Conference Secretary Paul Coverdell (Ga.) had been the intermediary between K Street and the Conference before he died unexpectedly last July, but even then his efforts focused primarily on trying to help pass GOP-sponsored education reform bills, sources said.

The effort is likely to be modeled after Santorum's own grassroots campaign efforts, which better positioned him to win a second Senate term last November. Both Republican leaders are expected to begin contacting lobbyists and representatives of interest groups in the coming weeks in the hope of scheduling meetings to discuss the GOP agenda and strategy for the 107th Congress.

Although the formalized program is a new approach for Senate Republicans, they have previously reached out to K Street and interest groups on an ad hoc basis, driven by whatever issue was on the front burner of the legislative agenda, several Congressional and K Street sources said. For example, the GOP's past efforts to reach out to the leaders of the new economy won high praise. But Senate Republicans' failure to mobilize K Street last year on efforts to pass legislation repealing the estate tax bewildered some lobbyists and Congressional aides.

"I think with their previous majority numbers, Senate Republicans took the business community for granted, and now they are holding on for dear life," a veteran lobbyist suggested. "If they don't work with the business community now, they are out."

Several lobbyists expressed a sense of relief that Senate Republicans plan to open up better lines of communication to help provide them with a snapshot of what they should expect to happen with upcoming legislation.

"I think the thing that sometimes frustrates lobbyists downtown is wondering what the Senate will do next," a business lobbyist observed. "It is an unpredictable place, and regular communications would be helpful."

A high-tech lobbyist added that Republicans might have won more battles in the past few years if they had worked more closely with the business community. "I think they miss some of the boat when they don't mobilize their friends downtown," the lobbyist said.

Although Santorum and Hutchison say the creation of the outreach program is strictly for legislative purposes, some lobbyists acknowledge it helps them determine who is interested in their issues enough to warrant a campaign contribution. For example, a lobbyist noted that when the high-tech task force met, it helped foster relationships with Senators who traditionally have not been considered friends of their industry.

"This gave everybody in the room an opportunity to develop relationships that had been non-existent before," the lobbyist said. "When a Senator shows an interest and knowledge about your issues that obviously helps to build a relationship that is not only going to help with public policy but also benefit their political goals."

Another lobbyist close to the Republican leadership warned that the K Street purse strings are going to be pulled tight until those groups see the GOP advance bills they support. The litmus test, the lobbyist suggested, is whether the leadership is able to act quickly on the repeal of federal estate tax laws once the budget resolution is completed in April.

"This is going to be the signal," the lobbyist said. "With the margin being so narrow, a lot of people are going to hold back PAC money and individual contributions, because they are not just going to put it out if they are not getting results. It would be stupid."

There is hope on K Street, though, that with Republicans in control of both Congress and the White House for the first time in five decades, business interests have a good shot at getting some corporate-friendly bills passed this year.

"We don't have to stop legislation, and that is the real change for Republicans in the Congress," a prominent lobbyist noted.

This coalition building, Hutchison said, is paramount to Senate Republicans' success in passing Bush's agenda. With the Senate evenly split, these coalitions could help woo some conservative Democrats to vote with Republicans on certain issues.

"We want the outside groups to be in communication with us because that helps us when we have an issue like tax cuts or education and they can go in a bipartisan way to talk to people about the importance of some of these issues," she said.

Final details are still being worked out as to how the duties will be divided up between the two GOP leaders in regard to K Street and other interest groups; but it is likely Santorum will be the point person in reaching out to the African-American community, while Hutchison will seek to foster a better relationship with Latino leaders. Aides Mark Rogers and Barbara Ledeen will be designated to work on the effort with Santorum; Lee Johnson will handle similar duties for Hutchison.

As Senate Republicans begin to bridge the gap with K Street and other outside interest groups, House GOP leaders say they have already achieved a successful relationship with these groups through their coalition program. House Republican Conference Chairman J.C. Watts (Okla.) said he has been able to effectively broadcast his side's message by using communication tools offered by outside groups.

"Our coalitions are just invaluable," he said. "We bring them in, and we give them a lay of the land and tell them where we need them to take a turn and help us."

Partisan Disputes May Plague Debate Over Election Reform

Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON -- Here and in state capitals across the country, lawmakers have filed hundreds of election proposals since Florida's botched presidential vote. But the catchy title of one bill being considered in Nashville, Tenn., captures both the promise and the pitfalls of the nation's new election-reform movement. "The 2000 Presidential Election Debacle Reform Bill of 2001," Tennessee's state Sen. Steve Cohen calls his bill.

Mr. Cohen, a Democrat, insists he intends no partisan mischief, even though the proposal's title seems to reflect his party's opinion of how they lost the White House. "The election was a debacle whether you're a Democrat or a Republican," says Mr. Cohen, who chairs the Senate committee with jurisdiction over Tennessee elections. His bill, in fact, includes serious proposals drawn from Florida's problems: mandating recount procedures for close contests; re-inspections of voting machines; and written warnings to each voter using punch cards that they must punch hard.

Election experts say the nationwide response is long overdue, an acknowledgment that Florida and its counties aren't alone in their election missteps. Yet the very problems at the root of the Florida flap -- America's decentralized tradition of letting local governments decide election procedures and the partisanship that touches any debate over so basic a political exercise as voting -- stand to handicap the effort to find solutions as well, or even to define the problems.

With most state legislatures meeting this winter, about 300 bills have been filed on election reforms, and they vary widely. A few would ban the punch-card machines that became notorious in Florida, and many simply call for study commissions. Most states are looking to Washington to help them buy new voting machines. Monday, secretaries of states from across the nation are meeting here for their annual conference and will discuss reform ideas in earnest.

Meanwhile, in a bid to provide some national remedies, Congress is considering dozens of proposals, including a uniform poll-closing time and ballot design, weekend voting and, of course, study commissions. Even more than in the states, the debate here is shaping up just as Mr. Cohen's bill title implied: a reflection of partisan animosities lingering from November with an eye toward gaining advantage in next year's elections. That, in turn, lowers expectations for major action this year, beyond perhaps some financial aid to states.

"There's no question Democrats want to use this issue to maintain the image they were not treated fairly in Florida," says U.S. Sen. Judd Gregg, a New Hampshire Republican and ally to President Bush. "That's politics." For that reason, Mr. Bush has been reluctant to join the issue. But Sunday, pressed by House Democrats when he attended their retreat in Farmington, Pa., Mr. Bush vowed to put funds in his forthcoming fiscal 2002 budget for unspecified election reforms. He also reiterated his own gripe about television networks' premature projections. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson of Texas, saying election reform "is not free," asked Mr. Bush if she had his commitment to help. "Yes, ma'am," he told her, according to a witness.

"He is concerned that this [reform effort] will only be focused on Florida and only on a backward-looking analysis as opposed to us taking this opportunity to look forward," explains Ohio's Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell. The continued resonance of the presidential-election dispute was clear in a speech delivered late last week by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In it she said the "breath-taking episode" of the court's 5-4 ruling stopping the Florida recount in Mr. Bush's favor, from which she dissented, "awaits history's judgment."

Democrats in Congress, pressed by black lawmakers who vehemently believe many blacks were intimidated and disenfranchised in Florida and elsewhere, won't let the matter die. If House Speaker Dennis Hastert declines to name a bipartisan election-reform group, House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt this week may announce a Democratic panel.

"He intends to be McCain-like on this issue," says Gephardt spokeswoman Laura Nichols, referring to Republican Arizona Sen. John McCain's relentlessness on the separate campaign-finance reform issue.

In the Senate, Senate Minority Leader Thomas Daschle joined with the Republican majority leader, Mississippi Sen. Trent Lott, in directing the General Accounting Office to research voting problems with an eye toward some legislative solution, but he's also poised to go it alone. A poll conducted for congressional Democrats showed that nearly half of respondents said "the most important" issue facing the president and Congress is the need to modernize election procedures and machinery "to avoid" repeats of Florida.

Amid the tempered exchanges so far in Congress and the White House, all the more resounding was the partisan rallying cry at this weekend's meeting of the Democratic National Committee from newly elected party chairman Terry McAuliffe. "George Bush says he's for election reform. Reform this! I say: Park the police cars; take down the roadblocks; stop asking people of color for multiple forms of ID; print readable ballots; open the polling places; count all the votes; and start practicing democracy in America again!" he told party activists, who exploded in applause.

As Mr. McAuliffe spoke, associations for both local election directors and the secretaries of state were gathering here. Arkansas's Sharon Priest, the new president for the National Association of Secretaries of State, lamented, "I think there's going to be fighting over what's going to help the Democrats, and conversely, what's going to help the Republicans." But, she adds, "Everybody sees this as an opportunity" to address longstanding problems.

A task force she headed has made proposals the secretaries of state will discuss Monday and send to Congress once adopted. The package recommends that states conduct voter education, expand poll-workers' recruitment and training, continually train election supervisors, upgrade equipment, provide greater polling-place access for the elderly and disabled and maintain accurate voter rolls. From Congress, the group seeks unspecified funding to help the states.

The potential cost is evident in a bill co-sponsored by Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer of New York and Republican Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas. It seeks \$2.5 billion over five years, contingent on states adopting recommendations of a bipartisan commission. That sum is based on estimates of need as high as \$9 billion, an aide for Mr. Schumer said.

While the secretaries of state are considering a call for states to voluntarily adopt uniform election standards for federal elections, national standards are particularly controversial. "States are responsible for the conduct of elections," says Sen. Gregg.

Doug Lewis, who directs the nonpartisan, nonprofit Election Center and who participated in the weekend conferences, says too many people think technology is the answer. Problems could be averted, he says, if states did just two things: define what constitutes a vote, whatever the machinery, and spell out recount procedures for the state.

Even then, he adds, "with 100 million votes, 1.4 million poll workers, 22,000 election administrators, 200,000 voting places, 700,000 devices, you are going to end up with errors."

A Majority of Western Governors Call for Electricity Price Limits

The Wall Street Journal

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Despite Bush administration opposition, eight out of 11 Western governors, most of whom are Republicans, say they want wholesale prices for electricity capped throughout the region.

That sentiment could become unanimous if drought conditions persist into spring, constricting hydroelectric output and threatening the rest of the West with blackouts that so far have been limited to California.

Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne, a Republican who presided over a meeting here Thursday and Friday of the Western Governors' Association, said the "situation could drive our economy off the cliff" if not tackled immediately.

Still, Mr. Kempthorne opposes price controls, fearing the mechanism would discourage power-plant construction. Similar misgivings were expressed by Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, who said at the meeting that the effectiveness of any caps would be limited because federal energy regulators have jurisdiction over only part of the West's wholesale market.

But most governors, even Republicans who traditionally prefer a more laissez faire approach, said they want more action out of Washington, D.C. Washington state Gov. Gary Locke, a Democrat, urged federal regulators to enact price controls now.

"Otherwise, we will be expected to endure unjustified high prices for years to come," he said, which will do irreparable harm to the region's resource-based industries. "It's a survival issue," he said.

In general, attendees said they support a cap that would reimburse suppliers for operating costs and permit profit of 15% to 25% above that amount. The cap would be lifted when enough power was available to create a truly competitive market among the 11 Western states that are electrically interconnected.

The imposition of price caps was supported by eight of the 11 governors attending the meeting, including all three of the Democratic governors in attendance and five Republicans.

The bipartisan support signals widening political will in the West for greater federal-government involvement in the energy crisis, and could loom as a problem for the Bush administration, which has maintained that California must fix its own situation.

High prices in California since last May have nearly bankrupted its biggest utilities and forced the state to buy power. California Gov. Gray Davis signed a law last week that orders power conservation and authorizes the state to issue up to \$10 billion of bonds to fund power purchases. Mr. Davis, a Democrat who was praised by several governors for taking action, has been a strong supporter of regionwide price controls.

Support has been tepid, however, where it is needed most: at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which has control over such caps. Newly appointed FERC Chairman Curt Hebert, a Mississippi Republican, reiterated his opposition to them, urging the governors "to look at the evidence ... which insists it does long-term damage."

In California, wholesale price caps were lowered from \$750 to \$150 per megawatt hour last year, and prices continued to spiral out of control. Electricity consumed in California in January alone equaled the cost of half of all power consumed by the state for all of 1999.

Still, there are signs of wavering among FERC commissioners. One of them, Kentucky Democrat Linda Breathitt, said she is starting to have second thoughts about her opposition to price controls. If "broad political support" emerged for caps, she said, "I would give it a fresh look."

William Massey, another FERC commissioner and an Arkansas Democrat, goes even further. "This hands-off approach is both unlawful and politically unacceptable," he said, because current prices violate the standard, under the Federal Power Act, that rates be "just and reasonable." Mr. Massey, a Democrat, said he believes "consensus around price caps will grow."

Two vacancies on the five-member panel will be filled by the Bush administration.

Projections are getting grimmer. The Bonneville Power Administration, which markets electricity from the federal hydropower system on the Snake and Columbia rivers in the Northwest, says low precipitation levels so far this winter mean electric output may be only 64% of normal this year.

As the BPA is forced into the spot market to meet power-supply obligations, costs could force it to double rates charged to utilities for the next two years.

The governors came up with a list of actions they believe must be taken to control power use and quickly garner more electricity.

The list includes streamlining permits for new plants, developing programs that pay companies to relinquish electricity to other users and deploying more distributed-generation technologies, such as fuel cells.

Powell, Rice stress commitment to missile defense

CNN

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Secretary of State Colin Powell said Sunday the Bush administration remains committed to pursuing a national missile defense system, even if it means scrapping a long-standing treaty with Russia. President Bush made developing such a system a priority on the campaign trail, despite criticism from Democrats and international leaders that it would violate the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia.

Speaking on ABC's This Week, Powell made clear that such concerns wouldn't deter the White House from "pursuing a deliberate course of action with respect to missile defense," which he described as a matter of national interest.

"At some point, we will bump up against the limits of the ABM treaty," Powell said. "At that time, we will have to negotiate with the Russians, what modifications might be appropriate, and we have to hold out the possibility that it may be necessary to leave that treaty if it is no longer serving our purpose."

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice echoed those comments on CNN's "Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer." She said much had changed in nearly 30 years and, as such, the development of a missile defense systems was justified.

"The president is committed to restructuring the nuclear relationship and making defenses against limited threats from rogue states or accidental launch a part of the new, restructured relationship," Rice said.

"We understand that there's a lot of work to do with the allies and the Russians, but we believe that, with the proper context and with the chance to do the diplomacy, we can make this work."

Powell said the development of a missile defense system was not imminent.

"It's not something that's going to happen tomorrow and it's not something that's going to happen without full consultation with our friends and allies," Powell said.

Norton: U.S. would drill responsibly in Alaska

CNN

WASHINGTON (CNN) - U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton indicated on Saturday that the resumption of oil drilling off the California coast was possible after the year 2012 and again promised that oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, if allowed, would not harm the environment.

"President Bush has said that he would honor the moratorium that exists on drilling off of California and Florida," Norton said during an interview on CNN's "Evans, Novak, Hunt & Shields."

"But it is a long-term issue to deal with the energy problem. The people of California know already how much of a problem that we have in providing energy over the long run." Norton was referring to the past 18 consecutive days of dangerously low electricity reserves in California.

California offshore drilling moratorium

A moratorium on U.S. oil drilling off California was imposed by Congress in 1990 and is set to expire in 2012, according to the Americans for Democratic Action, an environmental group. On September 24, then-Republican vice presidential candidate Dick Cheney -- a former oil industry executive -- said he was against California offshore drilling, but expressed support for new oil ventures in the Arctic Refuge.

During the Senate hearing on Norton's nomination, Democratic senators expressed fear that Norton, a former Colorado attorney general, would impose environmentally harmful policies on federally owned and managed land. "Her record strongly indicates that she will heavily tilt that balance away from conservation, away from understanding what a sacred duty we have," Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minnesota, said.

24 'no' votes in Senate

Only Attorney General John Ashcroft's hearing resulted in more negative votes for confirmation in the Senate. On January 30, Norton was approved by a 75-to-24 vote, with Democrats split down the middle.

Norton, when discussing the Bush administration proposal to drill for petroleum in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, said the refuge "is something that can only be used for oil and gas exploration if Congress is convinced and if the president is convinced that that can be done in a responsible, environmental way," Norton said. "It cannot be done until Congress approves it."

Republicans hold a slim majority in both houses of Congress.

President Bush has said his energy policy will be aimed at cutting U.S. dependence on imported oil and at helping low-income consumers.

Norton said many methods can ease the impact of drilling on the environment, "for example, the drilling only taking place in the dead of winter, only on icy roads -- as opposed to asphalt across the tundra, being sure that the drilling is done with very little space on the surface reaching a lot of space underneath."

Refuge last Alaskan area off-limits to drilling

The coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge represents the last 5 percent of the state that remains off-limits to drilling, according to the Sierra Club, a national environmental group.

The refuge stretches from the mountains of the Brooks Range to the Beaufort Sea in northeast Alaska. The Sierra Club describes the refuge as a "narrow 1.5 million-acre coastal plain," and says drilling there would be "as shortsighted as damming the Grand Canyon for hydroelectric power or tapping Old Faithful for geothermal energy. It would be as foolhardy as burning the Mona Lisa to keep you warm."

On the Editorial Pages on February 5, 2001

The Energy Equation

Washington Post

PRESIDENT Bush formed a Cabinet-level committee on energy policy last week. His press secretary, Ari Fleischer said the president sees an imbalance between energy supply and demand, which is best met by boosting supply, "not only so we can bring prices down to the American consumer but also so we can avoid an unnecessary over-reliance on foreign supplies." Mr. Bush wants to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil exploration, Mr. Fleischer said, "so we can produce energy that the American people can use, American energy for the American consumer."

It sounds logical. But it's worth examining the underlying assumptions. Is there an energy crisis, and if so, what kind? What part of the problem can the market take care of, and what must government do? What's the right goal when it comes to dependence on overseas sources? None of the answers is as obvious as the rhetoric can make it sound.

America cannot drill its way out of ties to the world oil market. There may be an emotional appeal to the notion of American energy for the American consumer and a national security argument for reducing the share that imports hold. But the most generous estimates of potential production from the Alaska refuge amount to only a fraction of current imports. To reduce dependence on foreign oil requires reducing dependence on oil in general, through lowered consumption or expansion of other energy sources. President Bush has promised a comprehensive plan; one basic test will be how strongly it addresses those parts of the energy equation.

As population and the economy grow, so does demand for energy. That's most evident right now in the case of natural gas, which has become the fuel of choice because it's clean-burning. Skyrocketing demand has outpaced both the production and distribution systems, leading to the price spikes that drove California's electric system to the brink of collapse. But before government jumps in with a cure, it's worth noting that industry already has begun to respond as you would expect to higher prices: rigs drilling for gas have increased from a low of 392 in April of 1999 to more than 800. That's not much comfort to consumers facing painfully high heating bills this winter, but in a year or two the new supply will help bring the market back into balance.

For the longer term, as demand continues to outpace domestic production, imports from Canada could help make up the difference. U.S. industry is pushing for greater access to federal lands, including some offshore, where drilling has been restricted. On some of those lands, drilling might be possible at little environmental risk. Where there is risk, would Americans rather take a chance on damaging the environment or depending more on Canadian imports? The debate calls for more than simple slogans. At the same time, environmentalists have to acknowledge that any solution has costs: If you prefer natural gas to nuclear or coal, you have to build more pipelines.

Finally, though it isn't popular to say so, the proper price for energy is not necessarily the cheapest. Poor people need protection against price hikes, and too much volatility will damage the economy. But for many reasons -- to slow global warming, reduce foreign dependence and more -- efficient use of energy has to be a primary goal. Pricing energy to create an incentive to conserve would be an important step toward correcting that supply-demand imbalance that worries Mr. Bush.

Steps for Ballot Reform

New York Times

As Congress and state legislatures gather themselves for the task of modernizing the nation's antiquated voting systems and addressing the other flaws in the electoral process, there will be a strong temptation to settle for quick and ineffective remedies. The impulse should be resisted. The balloting breakdowns the country witnessed in November demonstrated that a complete overhaul is needed in the way Americans vote. The federal government and the states will have to work together to get the job done, with Washington providing standards and money and the states installing new equipment.

Comprehensive ballot reform is as much about political accountability as it is about improving the mechanics of voting. For too long, local governments have been left to conduct elections with insufficient resources and guidance. Last November's experience argues for a reversal of this historical delegation. State governments must fulfill their constitutional duty by taking a more active role in running elections, and by ensuring that they conform to uniform standards. Congress, for its part, must assert a federal interest in the integrity of the process and in guarding the right of citizens to have their votes weighed equally.

The failures in November, if anything, look worse today, now that a full accounting from the states is available. Florida was not the only place where confusion reigned. It took Oregon nine days to determine a winner. New Mexico did not do so until Nov. 30. In hundreds of jurisdictions around the country, unreliable equipment, errors by ill-informed voters, inaccurate voter registration rolls, abuses in the absentee-voting process and staffing problems at polling places contributed to the tangled outcome.

Within Florida, where the legal skirmishing focused mostly on counties that used punch card systems, the array of problems was broader than first imagined. The highest rates of discarded ballots were in counties that used paper

ballots but lacked on-site optical scanning machines. The same voting system in counties that paid to have the scanners at precincts proved very reliable, in part because voters were given a chance to fix ballots rejected for failing to register a choice or for registering more than one.

The fact that some voters were afforded a right to fix faulty ballots while others were not, depending on the resources spent by their particular county, makes a powerful case for ballot reform. The Supreme Court's ruling in the Florida recount case found that such disparities violate the Constitution's equal protection clause.

We are heartened that President Bush has spoken out in favor of election reform. His support will be crucial in encouraging Congress to tackle the issue. Dennis Hastert, the House speaker, has promised to appoint a select committee to review balloting problems and recommend changes. A number of bills have already been proposed. The most promising is sponsored by Senator Charles Schumer, a New York Democrat, and Senator Sam Brownback, a Kansas Republican. When it is re-introduced tomorrow, the legislation will call for a commission to study all aspects of ballot reform — from new voting technologies to ways of protecting the integrity of voter registration lists — and will provide \$2.5 billion in matching grants over five years to help states carry out its recommendations.

Because the Constitution grants states direct control over presidential elections, Congress can best protect the federal interest in their uniformity and integrity by offering grants to states, provided their electoral reforms meet certain standards. However, more than \$2.5 billion in federal money may be required, and the bulk of it ought to be made available soon. Because many states feel compelled to start improving their systems now, the immediate challenge for Congress is to make sure interim reforms conform to a national strategy.

Ideally, there should be a uniform national system for presidential balloting. A single technology may not be practical in the near term, but by creating stringent standards that all systems must meet, and insisting that states regulate elections more closely, Congress can lead the country toward that goal.