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## US heading for another election fiasco as reforms fail

By **Andrew Gumbel in Los Angeles**

22 April 2004

The United States may be on the way to another Florida-style presidential election fiasco this year because legislation passed to fix the system has either failed to address the problems or has broken down because of missed deadlines and unmet funding targets.

Such is the conclusion of a damning new report by the US Commission on Civil Rights, a bipartisan government body which previously looked into the Florida mess and found alarming evidence of voter disenfranchisement among poor and minority groups, incorrectly compiled voter rolls and other glaring irregularities. "Many of the problems that the commission previously cautioned should be corrected yet prevail ... Unless the government acts now, many of those previously disenfranchised stand to be excluded again," the report said.

The commission's criticisms focused on the failure to implement President George Bush's Help America Vote Act (HAVA), passed in October 2002, which promised \$4bn (£2.3bn) to help states overhaul antiquated voting machinery - notably the notorious punchcard devices that caused so much trouble in Florida - and sought to set up a nationwide system of provisional voting for people who believe they have a right to vote but find themselves omitted from the official list.

It said that out of 22 key deadlines that have come and gone since the act's passage, only five have been met. Most seriously, an oversight committee designed to advise states on streamlining their voting procedures and implementing the act's provisions was not appointed until last December, 11 months behind schedule. Most states are unlikely to make reforms before the presidential election on 2 November.

In addition, the Bush White House has consistently proposed less money than promised by the act, so states that have passed their own reform legislation have found themselves

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crucially short of money for implementation.

On signing the act 18 months ago, Mr Bush said: "When problems arise in the administration of elections we have a responsibility to fix them. Every registered voter deserves to have confidence that the system is fair and elections are honest, that every vote is recorded, and that the rules are consistently applied."

Almost half of the states have requested exemptions from updating their voting equipment, and 41 out of 50 have requested extensions until 2006 to consolidate voter registration lists at state level so they can more easily be checked for accuracy. "It will be difficult if not impossible for states to build the necessary election infrastructure by November," it concluded.

The commission report can only heighten the anxieties of an electorate already alarmed by a growing controversy over touchscreen voting machines being introduced - with Hava money - in many parts of the South and West. The machines make meaningful recounts impossible and rely on software developed by companies with strong ties to President Bush and his Republican Party. California is expected to decide this week whether to decertify its touchscreen machines.

The debate over the health of America's electoral procedures is turning into a partisan fight, with Republicans dismissing the concerns as Democratic politicking unworthy of serious examination. When the Commission on Civil Rights convened an expert panel in Washington this month to discuss its report, the Republican Party delegation walked out before the proceedings began, one panel participant, Rebecca Mercuri, a Harvard University voting machinery expert, said.

In Florida during the 2000 election, thousands of eligible, predominantly black, voters were erroneously identified as former felons and purged from the voter rolls by a private company hired by Katherine Harris, who acted as the state's top electoral official and also as co-chair of George Bush's state campaign committee.

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