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MAKING VOTES COUNT

## Budgeting for Another Florida

**P**resident Bush has been spending money with reckless abandon, but he has found at least one place to economize: election reform. Mr. Bush undoubtedly remembers the debacle of 2000, and the federal government's promise to replace unreliable voting machines, train poll workers and upgrade voter registration lists before another presidential election rolled around. But in the budget he proposed last week, fixing the machinery of American democracy wound up on the bottom of the president's priorities, and wildly underfunded.

After the trauma of the Florida recount, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act, and when President Bush signed it, he declared that "when problems arise in the administration of elections, we have a responsibility to fix them." But the president's new budget provides only \$40 million of the \$800 million promised for election improvements at the state level this year.

That is only the latest outrage in a long series of actions that have made it clear neither the president nor Congress is very serious about fixing the system.

The Election Assistance Commission, which is charged with administering the act, was appointed nearly a year after the legal deadline. It was given only \$2 million for its operating expenses this year, not the \$10 million it was due. As a result, it works in borrowed offices, with a skeletal staff. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been allocated for making improvements at the state level, but the commission is too short of cash to distribute it. By law, the money cannot be disbursed until the states' plans appear in The Federal Register, and the commission cannot afford the \$800,000 publishing cost.

The White House argues there is no need to allocate all the promised money, since the commission has cash from previous years that it has not distributed. That's a fascinating bit of circular reasoning: starve the commission to keep it from doing its job, and then cut the budget because the job has not been done. Representative Steny Hoyer, the Maryland Democrat who was a lead sponsor of the act, says that it relied on "a careful, conservative estimate of the cost to reform our election system nationwide," and that the amounts proposed by President Bush are not adequate.

Many of the same problems that created the Florida mess still exist all around the country. America cannot afford another election in which there is widespread mistrust of the result. There should be

bipartisan support for fully financing the Help America Vote Act, and for picking up the pace of reform.

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