

Statement of

# **The Honorable Bill Nelson**

United States Senator  
United States Senate  
January 27, 2012

Mr. Chairman:

While America remains the greatest nation in history, it's true our country's path to democracy hasn't been without struggles. Minorities and women had to fight for years to have voting privileges - the constitutional right that is to be the subject of our hearing today.

We should note that this is the first time this subcommittee has convened outside of Washington, D.C., and it's appropriate that we meet here in Florida - a state that showed the world how important it is to ensure everyone's right to vote and to have their vote counted. And yet it's a state that only recently passed a new law that might jeopardize that right.

What's sad is, we're not alone. Legislatures in more than a dozen states, where extremists seemed to have gained control, passed laws last year that place controversial and unnecessary hurdles between the voting booth and our citizens - especially young voters, seniors and minorities.

In fact, these new laws could make it harder for more than five-million eligible voters to cast their ballot in this year's presidential election. As unbelievable as that seems, it's according to the widely respected Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, which recently completed the first, comprehensive study of the new laws.

So today we're here to examine, among other things, how one of these election laws made its way through the Florida Legislature and was quickly signed by the governor - despite widespread public outcry.

This law reduces the number of early-voting days, including canceling the Sunday right before the Tuesday election. It also makes voting harder for people who have recently moved to another county and have an address change, like college students. And it subjects voter-registration groups to penalties and fines for mistakes. It's so burdensome that the League of Women Voters was forced to abandon its registration drives in Florida after 72 years.

The Miami Herald has called passage of this law part of a "disturbing trend."

The Orlando Sentinel has said the law "amounts to ... weakening democracy."

And Florida Today called it an "assault on the most cherished of American rights."

I would have to agree. It's why I asked for this hearing.

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and Sen. Leahy for the Judiciary Committee's interest, and I wish to commend you for conducting this investigation - and for looking beyond partisan political differences to the rights of every citizen. Our goal is, and should always be, to ensure the citizens have every means of exercising the power our Constitution says belongs to them. It's a privilege all Americans have demanded throughout the history of our nation.

In 1872, after being arrested for casting what was then an illegal vote in a presidential election, Susan B. Anthony called it a "downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty, while they [ were ] denied the use of the only means of securing [ those blessings ] ... the ballot."

Nearly a hundred years after that our country still had in place poll taxes and literacy tests aimed at blocking African Americans from voting.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. warned us back then that "all types of conniving methods" could be used to keep people from becoming registered voters. The civil rights leader said, "The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic traditions - it is democracy turned upside down."

So with a healthy dose of skepticism, let's consider what has happened to voting rights in our country over just the past year. Let us try to determine whether some new "conniving methods" are being used to deny some Americans the only means of securing the blessings of liberty - the ballot.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman