



Statement on Election Reform

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The Sage Hillel taught "Al tifros min hatzibur, Do not separate yourself from the community." (*Pirke Avot 2:5*) Moreover, it is our responsibility to play an active role in our community and in choosing its leaders. Rabbi Yitzhak taught that "A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted" (B. Talmud Berachot 55a). Today, the method for us to voice our concerns and register our approval is through the electoral process.

The right to vote is the cornerstone of our democracy and a cherished liberty. Our recent national elections saw record voter participation. Wisconsin ranked third in the nation in voter turnout on November 7th with 66% of eligible voters going to the polls as compared to 53% nationally. Factors contributing to this high voter turnout included same day voter registration and increased use of absentee ballots by the elderly, disabled, and other citizens who were unable to get to the polls. In part because of the record turnout, the November 2000 election also saw many barriers to voter participation including a shortage of poll workers resulting in long lines and hour-long waits to vote; problems with the design of election ballots; outdated and unreliable voting machines; and a lack of assistance for voters with a primary language other than English.

As part of the Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations' (MJCCR) Get Out the Vote effort, we transported older adults to the polls, including seniors from the Former Soviet Union. We observed the following obstacles to voter participation:

- Because of the shortage of poll workers and limited poll hours, lines were extremely long. The older adults we assisted had to stand in line for one to two hours waiting to vote, much of the time standing outside in harsh weather conditions. Some seniors were too frail to endure the long wait in the cold and had to return home without voting.
- Older adults from the Former Soviet Union are proud that they have become American citizens and take the responsibility of voting very seriously. Unfortunately, some of these individuals faced barriers at the polls from English-only speaking poll workers and the lack of translation assistance. As a result, some were unable to vote. Overall, the availability of interpreters was very limited. Some sites serving significant number of Russian speaking American citizens did not have interpreters available. At others, they were available for just a few hours. Individuals who needed to register to vote were not able to do so because of the lack of translation services.

To address these concerns, the MJCCR supports election reforms that both reduce the possibility of fraud and increase voter participation, and rejects measures that may limit voter participation. We strongly support the following reforms:

- Enhanced training and certification of election officials.
- Statewide, centrally maintained computerized database of registered voters to prevent fraud.
- Consideration of extended polling hours and days, and/or mail in ballots, except where contrary to the U.S. Constitution.
- Innovative approaches to recruiting additional poll workers.
- Provision of bilingual poll watchers and bilingual ballots in areas with significant concentration of bilingual populations.
- Increased use of absentee ballots to increase voter participation, remove barriers for the elderly and for working people, and to reduce congestion at the polls.
- The elimination of punch card ballot systems and other outmoded equipment and replacement thereof with accurate, reliable, and verifiable modern equipment.
- Federal financial assistance to the states to assist with modernization of voting equipment.

In addition, the MJCCR is committed to continuing and expanding our get-out-the-vote efforts, as well as exploring approaches to encourage the recruitment and training of poll workers among Jewish community voters.