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Voting Reform Is in the Cards
By JIMMY CARTER and JAMES A. BAKER III

WE agreed to lead the Commission on Federal Election Reform because of our shared concern that too many Americans lack confidence in the electoral process, and because members of Congress are divided on the issue and busy with other matters.

This week, we issued a report that bridges the gap between the two parties' perspectives and offers a comprehensive approach that can help end the sterile debate between ballot access and ballot integrity. Unfortunately, some have misrepresented one of our 87 recommendations. As a result, they have deflected attention from the need for comprehensive reform.

Our recommendations are intended to increase voter participation, enhance ballot security and provide for paper auditing of electronic voting machines. We also offer plans to reduce election fraud, and to make the administration of elections impartial and more effective.

Most important, we propose building on the Help America Vote Act of 2002 to develop an accurate and up-to-date registration system by requiring states, not counties, to organize voter registration lists and share them with other states to avoid duplications when people move. The lists should be easily accessible so that voters can learn if they're registered, and where they're registered to vote.

Some of our recommendations are controversial, but the 21 members of our bipartisan commission, which was organized by American University, approved the overall report, and we hope it will break the stalemate in Congress and increase the prospects for electoral reform.

Since we presented our work to the president and Congress, some have overlooked almost all of the report to focus on a single proposal - a requirement that voters have driver's licenses or government-issued photo ID's. Worse, they have unfairly described our recommendation.

Here's the problem we were addressing: 24 states already require that voters prove their identity at the polls - some states request driver's licenses, others accept utility bills, affidavits or other documents - and 12 others are considering it. This includes Georgia, which just started demanding that voters have a state-issued photo ID, even though obtaining one can be too costly or difficult for poor Georgians. We consider Georgia's law discriminatory.

Our concern was that the differing requirements from state-to-state could be a source of discrimination, and so we recommended a standard for the entire country, the Real ID card, the standardized driver's licenses mandated by federal law last May. With that law, a driver's license can double as a voting card. All but three of our 21 commission members accepted the proposal, in part because the choice was no longer whether to have voter ID's, but rather what kind of ID's voters should have.

Yes, we are concerned about the approximately 12 percent of citizens who lack a driver's license. So we proposed that states finally assume the responsibility to seek out citizens to both register voters and provide them with free ID's that meet federal standards. States should open new offices, use social service agencies and deploy mobile offices to register voters. By connecting ID's to registration, voting

participation will be expanded.

Our proposal would allow voters without photo ID's to be able to cast provisional ballots until 2010. Their votes would count if the signature they placed on the ballot matched the one on file, just as the case for absentee ballots. After that, people who forgot their photo ID's could cast provisional votes that would be counted if they returned with their ID's within 48 hours. Some have suggested we use a signature match for provisional ballots after 2010, but we think citizens would prefer to get a free photo ID before then.

In arguing against voter ID requirements, some critics have overlooked the larger benefit of government-issued ID's for the poor and minorities. When he spoke to the commission, Andrew Young, the former mayor of Atlanta, supported the free photo ID as away to empower minorities, who are often charged exorbitant fees for cashing checks because they lack proper identification. In a post-9/11 world, photo ID's are required to get on a plane or into a skyscraper.

We hope that honest disagreements about a photo ID will not deflect attention from the urgency of fixing our electoral system. While some members of Congress may prefer to block any changes or stand behind their particular proposals rather than support comprehensive reforms, we hope that in the end they will work to find common ground. The American people want the system fixed before the next election, and that will require a comprehensive approach with a bipartisan voice in favor of reform.

Jimmy Carter was the 39th president. James A. Baker III was secretary of state in the George H. W. Bush administration.