WE URGE YOU TO SUPPORT H.R. 550,

A BILL TO REQUIRE A VOTER-VERIFIED PERMANENT PAPER RECORD OF THE VOTES WE CAST IN OUR ELECTIONS, i.e. A PAPER TRAIL.

Problem: In the past several elections, there have been a growing number of problems with the transparency and validity of the vote count after the votes have been cast. One source of this problem has been the touch screen voting machines that have no paper receipt that each voter can inspect to assure the machine has properly recorded the vote that was cast.

Solution: Only a federal law that applies to all federal elections will solve this problem in a uniform manner in all the states. When the equipment is acquired for federal elections, it will also be used in state elections, thus curing the problem at both the federal and state level.

History: Over the last several years, there have been numerous bills introduced to address this critical issue, but the Republican majority refused to let any of them out of committee. For example, the bill we are urging you to support, HR 550, was filed by Rep. Holt on February 2, 2005. At that time it was referred to the House Committee on House Administration and it is still before that committee, with no action having been taken. Rep. Holt has filed it again for consideration in the new Congress.

With the change in leadership in Congress, *and* with a vigorous grassroots call for quick passage, we believe we will now be able to restore trust in the American voting process through passage of this bill.

HR 550

HR 550 (link to http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d109:h.r.00550:) was introduced in the House of Representatives by Rep. Rush Holt of New Jersey in the 109th Congress with 222 cosponsors. Rep. Holt has re-filed it in the 110th Congress that will convene in January. (We will post the new bill number when we have it, and keep you informed of the bill's progress in the new Congress next year.)

This bill also provides other critical protections, such as random, unannounced hand counts of the voter-verified records to protect against fraud.

HR 550 is **federal** legislation (not state). So please contact your federal representatives, i.e., your congressional representative in the House of Representatives and your Senators, to encourage them to support this bill when it comes before them. You can write your legislators now. [link]

GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

How To Get HR 550 Passed Quickly

Some mistakenly believe that the center of power lies in the Congress, or with the President, or even with the Supreme Court. No, the real focal point of power is in the hands of the people. The extent to which the people's power can be ignored is a measure of how much the people ignore it themselves. Effective grassroots advocacy is about taking back that power and exercising it.

The laws are written by the legislative branch of government, either the Congress or the state legislative bodies. They are carried out by the executive branch of government, either the President or the Governors, who have multiple agencies at their disposal for this purpose. And the laws are interpreted by the judicial branch when the meaning intended by the legislature is unclear, or a claim is made that a constitutional provision has been violated.

Grassroots advocacy focuses on getting new laws passed or old laws amended, so our advocacy efforts are directed at the legislative branch. Our goal is to influence what our elected representatives are willing to sponsor and vote for or against.

Education and mobilization of the voters are the levers that make the legislative process move in one direction or another. Using various methods to bring an issue to the attention of the public is the first step. The Internet has provided new, efficient tool for this—websites, email, communication in real time at little cost, blogs, letters to elected officials with a few strokes of the keyboard, discussion boards, and who knows what's next.

But it's important to keep the old methods "oiled," as well. Letters to the editor, leaflets, brochures, buttons, bumper stickers, and home-made signs are easy, inexpensive ways to influence legislation. With a little more effort, seminars, workshops, tea parties, art exhibits, human interest stories in the newspapers and on TV can take the discussion to the next level.

As you get more organized, having supporters on talk radio and featured in articles about the problem being addressed will reach an even wider audience. Meetings with legislators and their aids, phone calls, phone banks, plays and songs, can all be a part of a process that collectively brings about legislative change.

You might be thinking it sounds like a lot of work. Well, it is, but it's fun, as well. And when a victory is achieved, you know you have made a difference. It's a great way to meet interesting people, form friendships that last for years, and it can even be a family activity.

I. WHERE TO BEGIN

ASSESS YOUR RESOURCES

When working on legislative action, you begin with the tools you bring to the table. If you are a full time Mom and homemaker, that might be the skill of a good organizer of details, or knowledge about the local schools. Some might bring sales and marketing experience, experience with public speaking, financial management, the ability to write well, or expertise in designing brochures. Someone might have a good meeting space in their home or office building. Find out who has computers and how skilled are they in using the Internet.

Begin by assessing the experience and resources that are available among those who commit to working on an issue. This assessment may not be achieved by just asking people, as some are reluctant to offer until they become more involved. But a place to begin is for the Organizer/Leader to ask people to complete a form that solicits their contact information, their skills, interests, etc.

As the process develops, you will learn what each other has to contribute, and it may be different from what you originally assumed and not limited to their original offer. As commitment grows, so will participation.

DEVELOP A PLAN

With the resources you have available, develop a plan for local action. It's important to plan your strategy to achieve each goal, and set a time frame within which to achieve it. So don't forget, assign responsibility for taking action on each point to a specific person, pair, or team, and set a date when they are to report on their progress.

WHO DO YOU HAVE TO PERSUADE?

You must know who the major players are, and where the points of entry are with the particular issue you are addressing. This is information you may not have when you begin, but will learn in the process of working on the issue. Major players are not limited to the people in Congress who will eventually vote on the legislation. Remember what Tip O-Neil said, "All politics are local." If you mobilize effectively in the district the legislator is from, you are mobilizing her-his power base--where the bread is buttered. This is more effective than any team of lobbyists in Washington.

A critical point of entry is the legislator's offices within her-his district. Be sure that someone from your Get Together is assigned the task of visiting that office and speaking with staff. Find out when your Representative or Senator is going to be in town and make an appointment for a group of your members to visit with the legislator in person. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, so squeak a lot (politely please) and be sure the legislator knows you are squeaking.

Keep in touch with that office.

Among the resources that you assess, be sure to include the people that you know. Does anyone in your group have a personal relationship with someone in the community who can be especially helpful in raising awareness of the need for the legislative change you are working for? If so, decide how best to make use of this resource and include it on the action list.

Even when working on a national issue, there are local people who can be especially effective in influencing the opinions of others, right at home where the real power lays. For example, what does your mayor or city representative think about the legislative issues you are working on? Will they issue a press release on their position, or make a public statement that is covered by the media? Will a business leader in the community support your effort?

Be creative in your advocacy efforts, using the resources at hand in the most effective ways.

THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

If the law you want passed has not yet been put before a legislative body for consideration, you can initiate that process by finding a sponsor, i.e., a legislator who is willing to put her-his name on it, submit it for consideration, and shepherd it through the process to passage. The sponsor is critical. It needs to be someone who believes in the issue as much as we do and is willing to make it a priority on her-his agenda.

In addition, you need co-sponsors who will sign on but not be primarily responsible—as many as possible. So the first thing to do is find out if your legislator is willing to co-sponsor the bill, and if not why not.

Note: To make your efforts effective, communications with your legislators and their responses to those communications need to be compiled centrally. This creates transparency in your representative's position by bringing to light any discrepancies that may exist, or by confirming consistency where that exists. When discrepancies exist, a decision needs to be made how best to ask for an explanation.

After a bill is printed, it is then assigned to a committee. The Committee Chair has a lot of power over what then happens to it and when. The bill might sit and never come up for consideration. There might be a vote to pass it by, in which case it is dead. The bill might be considered by the committee, at which time it can be amended and made into something quite different from originally intended. A hearing might be scheduled at which testimony on the pros and cons of the bill is heard before it is voted on.

Voters in the Chair's district or state will be key players in the grassroots effort to get the bill out of committee without major changes. Voters in the districts and states of all the other committee members are also key players in achieving positive committee action on the bill. The committee's significant role in the success of a legislative initiative will require your active involvement at this juncture.

Once a bill is passed by the committee it then comes up for a vote. This is when national (or state for state legislation) mobilization to persuade as many legislators as possible to vote in favor of the bill will determine the ultimate outcome. This is the end pass, but its success will most often depend on the mobilization that was organized at the local level from the very beginning of the effort and continued up to this moment.

II. THE ADVOCACY ROLE

Ultimately, grassroots advocacy is about a common vision being manifested into action. The vision reflects the values that are held by the people and the community. It's the process of using the resources at hand to solve problems, inspire participation, educate the voters and mobilize the people necessary to transform a vision into law. The advocate's passion for the issue and ability to communicate that passion are critical to success.

But grassroots advocates have the most powerful tools of all available to them--the minds and the wills of the voters--if they can be persuaded to take action in support of your initiatives. So have your arguments ready. Why is the reform necessary, what are related issues, what has been tried before, what are other possible solutions to the issue, and why have you chosen this one? Consult with the people directly or adversely affected by the initiative. Enlist support and participation from diverse groups.

And don't assume someone will be unsupportive. You never know when they may have a personal interest in an issue based on some personal or family experience. Or your genuine concern and credibility may convince them to support it when they may not have done so otherwise.

Answer criticism, handle objections, play devil's advocate, and acknowledge personal feelings, emotions and agendas. Be assertive, not aggressive, and never assume anything. And be prepared to persevere and stay focused even under the harshest of criticism.

Be a team player. It's never about one person, it's a collaborative effort of many individuals with a common goal. Build relationships with other like-minded individuals and organizations, find the common ground, and be prepared to negotiate and compromise.

Relationship building with others is one of the keys to the advocate's success. Start with an open exchange of information and clarification of the issues, listen, build trust, commit to sharing information, understand the challenges created by change. And find ways for everyone to walk away feeling they were honored in the process, whatever the outcome.

Credibility is central to the advocate's success, which depends on being in integrity throughout the process. When you make an argument, be sure it's accurate. When you present data, be sure it's the most accurate available. People you work with and try to convince will come to know the quality of your work. They must believe in you to support your proposed changes, not just the first one, but those that arise over time.

In order to earn the credibility you need for success, be confident, knowledgeable, honest and forthright. Maintain a sense of humor and a good rapport with legislators, their staff, other advocates, lobbyists, your opposition, and above all, those working directly with you on the shared vision.

Ultimately, it's not as much about winning as it is about taking a stand for what you and others believe in. It's about being a player in the democratic process. To be silent in the face of what you know is wrong is worse than having tried and failed--failed at least for this round. There is always another.

And winning can happen on many levels. You never know how your courage to act will affect others, inspire them to act, and create a ripple effect that results in winning on levels never anticipated. Being involved in the public policy process is empowering, it can even be healing, especially if you are able to take a loss in your life and use your story to change things for others in the future. It gives value to your loss by assuring others won't suffer the same loss.

As Robert F. Kennedy once said:
Each time a man stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy, those ripples will build a current that can seep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.