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REGAINING VOTERS' TRUST

ELECTIONS SUPERVISORS: ACCOUNT TO PUBLIC

The Nov. 5 election post-mortem from the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition offers a number of sound recommendations to ensure that future elections will never repeat the fiasco of the September primary. Broward County leaders ought to pay heed to the suggestions, too, as both counties suffered similar mistakes.

The coalition includes groups such as the League of Women Voters, the NAACP and the ACLU. First and foremost, says the group, encourage volunteers to remain an integral part of the election process. It's an important element in a society's civic fabric. The key is to make sure that all poll workers are thoroughly trained. Among other recommendations:

- The police should not oversee the logistics of an election, as was done in Miami-Dade in November. Their presence, however benign, puts off some voters.
- Encourage county employees to work the polls, but do no more than encourage. It's costly to pull them away from regular duties, and it shouldn't be necessary if the elections staff is doing its job well.
- Appoint a standing advisory board to elections departments to monitor pre-election preparedness and report concerns to county commissions to stave off future fiascos.
- Provide ongoing voter education. Voters and poll workers understand the new touch-screen machines now. But both counties will register new voters between elections who also will need to be informed.
- Most important, both counties must ensure that their elections departments are headed by competent chiefs with clear lines of accountability. Miami-Dade's Elections Supervisor David Leahy is appointed and answers to the mayor, county manager and County Commission. Broward Elections Supervisor Miriam Oliphant is elected, but her budget is overseen by the County Commission. Voters in both counties seem far more unhappy with their supervisors' performances than do politicians.

They were each called to task after the primary by their respective county commissions. But thus far, neither Mr. Leahy nor Ms. Oliphant have told voters directly what they plan to do to make sure that we will never suffer another botched election. It is not enough for all the county officials involved to congratulate themselves for the smooth-running November vote. So much extra help should not have been needed in the first place. Mr. Leahy and Ms. Oliphant owe the public an accounting. The coalition has offered a good framework on which to build reliable agencies that deserve voters' trust.

- On Dec. 6, the Collins Center for Public Policy is sponsoring a conference, The 2002 Election Cycle: Lessons Learned, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., at the Fort Lauderdale Marriott Harbor Beach Resort. For information call 305-377-4484, ext. 10.

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