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NEW CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT STUDENT VOTER RIGHTS IN 2004 ELECTION

Challenging misinformation from election officials,
myths and misperceptions among students

Groups to track and respond to abuses nationwide; Educational drive to reach more than 200 campuses; Internet resource center to help students fight back; Toll-free hotline to provide legal assistance

Washington, DC (September 8, 2004) - At a news conference on Wednesday, September 8, 2004 a coalition of nonprofit organizations including Rock the Vote, the New Voters Project, and the Student Voting Rights Campaign launched a new drive to protect student voter rights in the 2004 election. Federal and state laws make it clear that students have the right to establish residency and vote where they go to school. Citing a wave of incidents where students have been denied the right to register and vote on campuses across the country including colleges in Virginia, New Hampshire, New York, Texas, and Arizona, the groups said they were putting election officials and politicians on notice that a new watchdog would stand up for the rights of young voters.

The campaign will organize students on over 200 campuses across the country to survey local residency requirements for student voters. The goal of this effort will be to determine whether local election officials are fully apprised of student voting rights. The groups stated that while most election officials are aware that students have the right to vote from their school address, even if they are from out of state, there are many officials who reject voter registration forms, subject students to unlawful questionnaires, or even threaten them with prosecution for voting.

The campaign will include a strong educational component targeting students directly that will educate them about their rights and challenge the widespread myths that prevent many students from registering. For example, election officials misinform students, in states such as New Hampshire, that registering to vote from where they go to school could affect their financial aid, health insurance, and tax status. Voter registration does not affect health insurance or taxes, and only in extremely rare, if not improbable, circumstances can it affect financial aid.

A centerpiece of the campaign will be a new website, launched last week, providing a resource center for students to learn the facts and download the tools they need to fight back when their rights have been impinged. The website will collect stories from students across the country. A speaker at the press conference highlighted the first story to come into the website; at the University of Arizona, a local TV station ran a story that strongly suggested out-of-state students could be prosecuted with a felony if they registered to vote at school. The website address, hosted by Rock the Vote, is <http://www.rockthevote.com/campusvote>. Student Voting Rights Campaign also has a reporting capability on the webpage at www.studentsuffrage.com.

As Election Day approaches, the groups will also organize poll watchers to monitor known "hot spots" where students may face challenges. In a sign of the growing national awareness about this issue, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, a leading organization in the Election Protection

Coalition, announced that the national toll-free Election Day hotline, 866 OUR VOTE, would include a rapid-response information system designed specifically for students facing barriers at the polls. The Lawyers Committee, which will provide counsel to the coalition, was a lead counsel in a recent case in Texas where a district attorney in a largely white county threatened students at a black college with felony prosecution for voting. The Brennan Center for Justice, at New York University School of Law, announced that it also would serve as counsel for the coalition, providing legal counsel and advocacy where necessary to safeguard student voting rights, as it already has done in New York and Delaware.

Where possible, the coalition will work collaboratively with local election officials to help avoid potential problems before they arise. The groups reiterated that most students are able to vote locally; the problems arise when local officials are either misinformed or, in some cases, politically opposed to student voting power in the local community.

The national campaign to protect student voter rights will build through the month of September to a national day of action on September 23, which will feature voter registration drives and, in those locations where local officials are non-cooperative, petition drives and other forms of direct action to safeguard student voter rights. The campaign will then continue up through Election Day in an effort to maximize youth voter turnout in the upcoming presidential election.

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