

**Testimony of
Rep. Thomas E. Petri (R-WI)
Before the Subcommittee on Elections of the
House Committee on Administration
March 23, 2007**

I'd like to begin my remarks by thanking Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member McCarthy, and the members of the Subcommittee for holding this hearing and also for affording me the opportunity to speak to you about H.R. 811, the Voter Confidence and Increased Accessibility Act of 2007. This hearing is part of an important process that can have a significant and positive impact on our electoral process. I am glad you have embarked upon this path, and I encourage your continued focus on this important issue.

I am here today in support of this legislation because I believe it will help to heal our electoral system of many ills, both real and perceived. As elected officials in a great representative democracy, we find ourselves in the position of easily understanding the problems addressed by H.R. 811. Each year, we stand before our constituents and by that election are given the opportunity to participate in this congressional policymaking process. The wide range of policy choices that we make only can be considered valid if our means of securing these seats is viewed as legitimate by the mass of voters making that decision.

I'd like also to take a moment to thank my colleague, and the author of this legislation, Congressman Rush Holt, for his efforts to bring these issues to the fore and for crafting a comprehensive bill that confronts a wide array of concerns with our election system. This project is infused throughout with his energy, and I do not think we would be here today but for his labors to transform abstract concepts into concrete legislation.

My support of H.R. 811 is easy to explain. I am attracted by its central concept: a voter-verified paper audit trail that can be used both by voters and election officials to confirm that the machines used to conduct federal elections are functioning properly and returning a result that includes the specific choice of each voter and reflects the true will of the aggregate of all voters. It is imperative that our elections be fairly conducted and crucial that they are carried out in a manner that communicates this fairness to the voting public.

Building from the bottom up, voter-verified paper receipts offer a method of checking and double checking the veracity of machine reported results at each stage of our electoral process – from the casting of the original vote through the reporting of a declared winner and finally as part of a recount held to determine the outcome of any contested election.

At various points in the course of our history, we have sought to improve and perfect the workings of our electoral democracy. We have faced various challenges and met those tests by altering the rules by which our elections are held. In recent years, such tests have arrived in a rapid fire fashion; first through the failure of voting systems in several high profile elections, and finally by the doubts that have grown around the electronic voting machines put in place to correct those earlier breakdowns.

Electronic voting technology is certainly part of the answer, but we cannot turn over the electoral process entirely to technology as voting is a human activity. Voter verified paper vote receipts are a means of marrying the modern and the traditional and will allow us to manage the changes wrought by new voting technologies without losing sight of the disparate individual actions they are designed to quantify. The importance of openness and transparency in this regard cannot be understated.

I understand that H.R. 811 is not without its critics, and that today this Subcommittee will hear from some within that camp. During this hearing, you will hear from folks with backgrounds in election technology and in the conduct of elections. You will be told about technical limitations to the addition of printers to existing electronic voting machines. I imagine you will hear testimony concerning storage of durable vote records; concerning the length of time necessary for this storage; and regarding the physical properties of the paper needed to meet these requirements. I would not be surprised to hear a witness mention the cost involved in adopting the voter verified paper trail standard or the difficulty of implementing such changes on a specific timeline.

I mention these items neither to steal the thunder of those witnesses who will follow my testimony, nor to suggest that my support for this bill is flagging, but to make the point that these are technical issues that can be solved through the combined efforts of election reform advocates, election administrators, and experts in voting technology. Approximately half of the fifty states have adopted legislation similar to H.R. 811, and there is a broad pool of experience on which to draw.

Perhaps the answer is easier than we think. Perhaps the answer is the use of optical scanning systems already in place in many voting precincts throughout the country. Such systems offer the advantage of marrying the security of voter-verified paper receipts with an electronic means of tabulation. Optical scanning has been shown to be easily adaptable to the needs of disabled voters and is less vulnerable to electronic tampering than many other systems.

In the end, the choice of an appropriate standard is the job of this Subcommittee and the full Committee on House Administration. It is your task to take the spirit of H.R. 811 and carry it forward as you craft a package that combines its goals and ideals with the realities faced by elections officials. Keep in mind the important role that voter confidence plays in the long-term health of our democracy and do not let mere technical issues stand in your way of forging ahead with a comprehensive solution that includes a voter verified paper trail for ensuring the fairness of all federal elections.

Thank you for the opportunity of presenting my views at this hearing.