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California

Testimony of Kathay Feng, California Common Cause

October 23, 2012

Good morning, Senator Correa and members of the Senate Elections and Constitutional Amendments Committee.

My name is Kathay Feng and I am the Executive Director for California Common Cause. We have been an active coalition partner of a national project called Election Protection. The Election Protection project has a number of components, including a national voter assistance hotline – 1-866-OUR-VOTE, and a very robust poll monitoring and field program.

Since 2006, the Election Protection Program has grown to have a major presence throughout the US. Although we are not a swing state, California has its share of election challenges, and EP's hundreds of volunteers – including attorneys and grassroots activists – have assisted tens of thousands of California voters through the years.

In 2008, we worked with local media and the registrar to address voter confusion over the "double bubble" ballot requirement. We fielded 22,000 phone calls, and issued a report of recommendations that has helped to support major changes such as California's recent passage of the Same Day Registration and Online Voter Registration. I am sharing with you the Executive Summary of the types of problems that were reported in 2008 and our recommendations.

In 2012, we have seen the rise of voter suppression efforts. Around the country, state legislators introduced bills designed to manipulate election rules designed to give certain politicians and their party a political advantage. In one year, we saw a proliferation of new restrictive election laws, including stringent voter ID laws, new rules on third party registration efforts, and laws limiting early voting. Some Secretaries of State have aggressively attempted to purge voters from lists, sweeping in eligible, long-time voters in the rush to "clean house."

It is no coincidence that there has also been a well-funded coordinated campaign by groups such as True the Vote and other Tea Party-affiliated groups to recruit 1 million volunteers to object to the qualifications of voters in targeted communities on and before Election Day. In our report, entitled "Bullies at the Ballot Box," Common Cause and Demos document how these vigilante volunteers are being rallied to block, in their own words, the "illegal alien vote" and "the food stamp army." Their stated goal is to make the experience of voting "like driving and seeing the police behind you."

Lest one thinks this is only happening in battleground states such as Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota, I want to report on developments we are seeing here in California. In our state, the group that has emerged is called Election Integrity Project. We believe they have received funding from groups such as Judicial Watch, and share leadership with the Tea Party.

This group was very active in our June 2012 primary elections, recruiting, training and deploying, we believe, hundreds of volunteers to poll sites to block the vote. In some cases, these vigilantes were reported to have created a hostile environment for voters by talking loudly in the poll site about challenging voters, the existence of voter fraud, and the need for voter ID, and the felony punishments for voter fraud.

There were reports of these vigilantes went one step further and attempted to block voters from casting ballots based on technicalities, such as a voter not announcing their name loudly or the pollworker not announcing the voters name loudly back.

We believe that Election Integrity Project is focusing their efforts on Latino and other minority voters, as well as young voters. We believe they will be very present in the counties of San Diego, Orange, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, Riverside, Ventura, Fresno, and even parts of Northern California.

As a result, our own coalition of organizations, which includes Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, NALEO, Public Council, ACLU, Disability Rights of California, Americans for Justice, and many other groups, is ramping up our Election Protection efforts to mobilize more poll monitors throughout California to try to protect voters' rights to supplement our hundreds of hotline volunteers.