

Testimony
The Honorable Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan
Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration
Hearing on
Voting Rights and Election Administration in the U.S. Virgin Islands
and Other Territories.
July 28, 2020

Madame Chair –

Thank you and all the members of the subcommittee for holding today’s hearing and for including me on this panel.

I hope that I can be useful to your understanding of the mechanics of elections, having served as Election Commissioner in the Northern Mariana Islands before being elected to Congress. I was responsible for voter registrations, managing absentee mail-in ballots, training election workers, securing ballots, and all the behind-the-scenes complications that produce a clean and credible election.

I know that we are all concerned about the impact the coronavirus may have on the already complicated—and in some ways vulnerable—election process.

So, just to begin with a note of hope, I will tell you that one week before the 2018 election a super typhoon struck the Marianas, throwing life into chaos, cutting off power and water, stripping the roofs from the schools where we go to vote.

The Governor delayed the election by one week. According to the March CRS report on Disrupted Federal Elections, “this episode appears to be the only case of a postponed federal general election in modern history.”

Despite the delay, even though many people were still struggling to put their lives back together, one week late they voted. Turnout was good. The integrity of the election seems to have been maintained. The results were not questioned.

If the people of the Marianas can hold an election after the profound physical disruption caused by the second worst typhoon in U.S. history, surely throughout America we can maintain this cornerstone of our democracy even in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic.

I am hopeful, based on that 2018 experience.

I am also hopeful, because Congress has already taken action to strengthen election security. We included funding in the Consolidated Appropriations Act in December for that purpose of which the Marianas is receiving \$600,000. I understand, our Election Commission is using that money to upgrade voting equipment, conduct election auditing activities, enhance the voter registration system and management, strengthen cyber-security, and better track campaign financing.

I am particularly satisfied with that appropriation because it comes through the Help America Vote Act. In 2002, when I was Election Commissioner and the Help America Vote Act was enacted, the Marianas had no Delegate in Congress and, therefore, no federal election. So, we were not included in HAVA. It had long been my goal to fix that gap and the Consolidated Appropriations Act did.

Congress did not stop with that one appropriation.

In March, we passed the CARES Act with funding to further ensure the November 3rd federal election goes on, despite the coronavirus crisis.

The Marianas Election Commission is receiving about \$600,000 from the CARES Act. Again, the money can be used to implement vote-by-mail for all voters and to increase the availability of online registration and early voting. The grant can also increase voting sites to reduce crowding and keep in-person voters healthy.

These actions do not mean we have done all that is necessary to make voting easier and more secure. I do not have to remind you that House Democrats' signature legislation, H.R. 1, the For the People Act, has that very goal of ensuring election integrity, but the Senate has refused to take up our bill.

The For the People Act would permanently include the Marianas in the Help America Vote Act.

There is also a technical correction adding the Marianas to the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and protection for Marianas voters, who use the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act to participate in Presidential elections.

And H.R. 1 establishes a commission composed of 12 Members of Congress to make recommendations on how to provide full and equal voting rights in the House of Representatives and in elections for President for the residents of the Marianas and the other U.S. insular areas.

Let us hope that today's hearing will remind America there is more work to be done to protect and strengthen the integrity of America's elections and ensure every citizen has the right to representation and the right to vote.

The House has acted. The Senate should, too.

Lastly, I want to use this opportunity to remind the subcommittee that there remains a need to make technical corrections in federal election law to ensure the people in the non-state areas are protected from intimidation, threats, or coercion, when they cast their ballots in federal elections.

In 2011, I introduced H.R. 3268, which makes all federal election law fully applicable in the Marianas, American Samoa, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Among the specific provisions, the bill bars anyone employed in a federal or insular government office from using their official authority to interfere with the nomination or election process. The bill bars aliens from voting and prohibits any false representations when registering or voting.

Among the co-sponsors was our late and beloved John Lewis. So, I hope that as part of our memorial to him, we consider taking up these long overdue technical corrections in federal election law, so everyone in the U.S. insular areas has all of the voting rights protections afforded to the rest of the United States.

I would certainly look forward to working with the Chair Fudge and the Subcommittee to advance that legislative goal.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.