vote in every election that he may desire to participate in.

On August 6, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the landmark legislation—the Voting Rights Act—that opened the doors of democracy to all Americans.

In our country's history, yes, we have stumbled. But yet at each stumble, leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Cesar Chavez, and many others, have encouraged us to get up, to stand up, to move America forward.

We, like them, believe America truly is an America in progress. Today, thanks in large measure to their work, we are at the dawn of a new America, an era in which doors of democracy and opportunity are open to all Americans.

We are waiting today for the inauguration of the first African-American President in the history of the United States. That in itself is history. But what is also historic about this reality is that as President he will be President for all 325 million people of America.

In his election, I think you see the statement that is truly the American ideal: that no matter who you are, no matter where you are from, anything is possible in this America of ours. That is what makes us a great nation. That is what we have seen as an America in progress which has brought us to this point in our Nation's history.

We have much work to do ahead. But I am very confident that America's best days are still ahead, as we continue to be the beacon of hope and opportunity and human possibilities for the entire globe.

Mr. President, I thank you and yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maine is recognized.

THANKING THE PEOPLE OF MAINE

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, since this is the first time I have spoken on the Senate floor since the elections have been completed, let me say I am very honored the people of Maine have chosen me to represent them in the Senate for another 6 years. It is a great honor and privilege to represent the great State of Maine, and I want to begin my remarks this afternoon by acknowledging that.

FINANCIAL REGULATION REFORM ACT OF 2008

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, throughout the past few months, I have had the opportunity to talk to literally thousands of Mainers, and the No. 1 issue that has been on their mind is the financial crisis, the poor state of the economy.

Public confidence in our Nation's financial system has been shaken badly by the extent, the scope, and the rapidity of the financial meltdown. As a former financial regulator in the State of Maine, a position I held for 5 years, I have become convinced that significant regulatory reforms are required to restore public confidence and to ensure that the absence of regulation does not allow a crisis like the one we are engulfed in now to happen ever again.

Therefore, today I will introduce a bill that would close two dangerous gaps in the Government's system for overseeing financial markets. The bill would also establish a formal process for developing additional, comprehensive reforms of our financial regulatory system.

Our economy has struggled with a credit crisis spawned by mortgage defaults in the subprime mortgage market and their ripple effects throughout markets for mortgage-backed securities. Complex financial instruments that were poorly understood, not transparent, and, in many cases, not regulated have exacerbated the crisis.

What was once thought of as America's mortgage crisis has metastasized into a nightmare of converging forces that could lead to a deep and global recession. As we have so painfully learned, financial markets are truly global, and the hopes and fears that affect these markets move with the speed of light through electronic communications and electronic trading.

The consequences in our country have been dire: falling home prices, rising foreclosure rates, plunging consumer sales, increased unemployment, a tremendous erosion of retirement savings, and billions of dollars for emergency stabilization programs. We are even looking at a Federal deficit that could reach the extraordinary figure of $1 trillion.

The Maine lobster industry, the paradigm of hardy, small town entrepreneurship, has also felt the blows of the crisis in high finance and a terrible economy. It is not only that consumers have reacted by reducing their purchases of lobsters—although that is one factor—it is also that the lobster industry is an innocent victim of the global financial crisis.

It is extraordinary that the global financial crisis is putting the very existence of Maine's centuries-old lobster industry in jeopardy.

Here is what happened. In addition to plunging demand, many lobstermen in Maine send their lobsters to Canadian processors. Well, it turns out that those Canadian processors are, in turn, financed largely by financial institutions in Iceland—in Iceland.

When the Iceland financial system collapsed, credit was terminated to the Canadian processors, which, in turn, stopped processing Maine lobster. Who would have guessed that the failures of banks in Iceland would claim as victims the lobstermen in the State of Maine? But that shows how integrated our financial system is worldwide. A lobster dealer in my State said:

> This is as devastating to the State of Maine as Hurricane Katrina washing away all the boats and blowing down all the wharves.

Nor is the fallout from the financial crisis confined to our shores. This past weekend, leaders of the G–20 nations who represent 85 percent of the world's economic activity met in Washington to address this crisis. Clearly, we need a coordinated global response to the downturn, but we also must take action to right our own ship. As we close out the 110th Congress and prepare to reconvene for the 111th, we must consider how to protect our financial system from the shortfalls in regulation, reporting, and transparency that helped lay the groundwork for a sudden and traumatic onslaught of bad economic news.

Consider that less than a year ago, the American financial system boasted five huge investment bank holding companies: Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, Goldman Sachs, and Morgan Stanley. Today, those institutions no longer exist as we had long known them. They have failed or are being acquired or, as Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley demonstrate, have converted themselves to bank holding companies subject to Federal Reserve supervision. What is astonishing, however, is that current Federal law assigns no agency responsibility for supervising these enormous institutions, even though experience has shown their safety and soundness could have vast implications for the financial system and the broader economy. Think about that. Your local credit union, your small community bank is subject to safety and soundness regulations, but these enormous Wall Street financial institutions that arguably have a far greater impact on our economy have not been subject to safety and soundness regulations. Instead, they participated in a completely voluntary program of the Securities and Exchange Commission—a program that was later deemed as inadequate by the SEC Chairman as he canceled it this fall.

My legislation would apply safety and soundness regulation to investment bank holding companies by assigning the Federal Reserve this responsibility. Although the five big firms have left the field, this is a necessary step. Any new investment bank holding company that might be organized would fall into the same regulatory void as its predecessors. The SEC would be able to regulate its broker-dealer operations, but no Federal agency would have the explicit authority to examine its operations for safety and soundness or for systemic risk. The collapses at Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers illustrate the tremendous hardship that can result under the recent voluntary system.

Federal financial officials have also pointed to a ''massive hole'' in their ability to monitor and manage systemic risk. That is the rapidly expanded markets in private, over-the-counter contracts known as ''credit default swaps.'' These are contracts that involve paying for protection against