All-Partisanship and Elections in the 21st Century

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Reform America, Inc. (RAI), a 501(c)(3) all-partisan non-profit organization, has been formed with the purpose of developing the leadership skills of young Americans while engaging the public in the political and voting process. RAI is committed to engaging the young people of America in a drive toward reforming the voting systems and other entrenched but undemocratic institutional procedures in the United States. Our mission: *educate to recreate.* For more information visit http://www.reformamericainc.org/

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All-partisanship sees the true power in the political process existing not in the political party but in the voter. The all-partisan vision is for the empowered voter to live in an environment with strong communities, public participation in the policy-making process, and open choice in the election process. This paper's focus is on two points: the empowered voter and open choice in the election process, each discussed in the context of how to reform the electoral process for the 21st century.

Before discussing what it means to reform our electoral process for the 21st century we need to take a giant step back and understand about exactly what it is we are ultimately talking: the running of an election. What does it mean to run an election?

There are three components to an election. The first is that there need to exist choices, or candidates, that are to be considered and voted upon. The second is the need for an electoral process, which includes the voting system (example: preference voting, proportional representation, plurality/first-past-the-post), ballot type (example: punch card, scantron, kiosk/touch screen, web-based), rules of candidate debate access, and rules of candidate ballot access. The third component is the need for voters. In a society that claims to cherish the ideals of republicanism, voters need to comprehend, and see as legitimate the process that is being used in an election in order for voters to make informed decisions about the choices.

Therefore in discussing what kind of reform is necessary to establish elections in the 21st century we need to ask what it is the 21st century voter requires? Stated

differently what is our responsibility to the 21st century voter? By "our" I mean we, the election administrators; we, the election theorists; and, we, the election reformers.

Our responsibilities to the voter are as follows:

1. Give voters a vote that counts.

2. Provide a ballot that is easy to understand and cast.

3. Provide a mechanism that ensures every vote is counted.

4. Provide unbiased information about all candidates.

5. Provide ample opportunity through all available media outlets for voters to learn about the views and ideas of all candidates, regardless of party.

6. Make full use of available technologies to meet the above responsibilities.

I will look at each responsibility separately.

Give Voters a Vote That Counts

In the wake of Election 2000 there were and continue to be cries that every vote cast was not counted. Dimpled chads, hanging chads, pregnant chads, and the rest of the Chad family made a mockery of the U.S. election system. The result: task forces, special committees, election "reform" laws all seeking to ensure that in the future every vote will be *counted*. I cannot deny the need for counting every vote, but we all as voters and citizens have to pause and ask, "why should I care if my vote is *counted* if it doesn't *count*?" My vote doesn't count?

Think about it. Sticking with the 2000 Presidential race for a moment, look at the state of Maryland. Maryland had 10 electoral votes. George W. Bush earned 40%; Al

Gore earned 60%. All 10 electoral votes went to Al Gore. Leaving the 40% of Marylanders who voted for Bush and got nothing to show for it aside, whose vote actually counted? Only the first 41% of voters who cast their ballot for Gore. Every Gore voter after Bush's total vote plus one might as well have stayed home. A similar scenario existed in many other states as well.

In Florida the final tally had Bush ahead by less than a fraction of a percent. It is said that Green Party candidate Ralph Nader acted as a spoiler for Al Gore here. The vote differential was so thin between Bush and Gore that Nader might very well have "robbed" Gore from his turn in the White House.

Is there anything that can be done to make the system more fair and representative? To make congressional, state, and local races all be truly legitimate in the eyes of every voter? To empower the 21st century voter to exercise her franchise without fear of "wasting" her vote, or contemplating strategic voting schemes? The existence of alternative voting systems such as Instant Runoff Voting, Cumulative Voting, and various proportional representation systems allows us to answer in the affirmative.

Provide a Ballot That is Easy to Understand and Cast

Recall the subject of many jokes from Florida in 2000. No I am not referring again to the Chad family. I am referring to the butterfly ballot. You remember – that funny looking ballot that caused some innocent Floridians to mistakenly vote for Pat Buchanan. I think back to a bumper sticker that was reportedly produced for Floridians in the wake of the election: "Don't blame me, I voted for both of them."

Ballot problems were widespread throughout the United States in 2000. Punch cards were difficult to punch; butterflies were difficult to understand; scantron papers

were difficult to fill in, and so forth. After we meet out first responsibility (*give voters a vote that counts*) we need to ensure the voter knows how to cast his powerful vote.

Provide a Mechanism That Ensures Every Vote is Counted

If we successfully meet the first two responsibilities, we will have before us a citizenry proudly holding the power of a powerful vote, and eager to enter a voting station to cast their vote in a way that is clearly understood. It goes without saying then that we (as election administrators, theorists, reformers, and as republicans) need to make sure each vote not only *counts* but also is *counted*. I asked above, what is the purpose of having a vote *counted* that does not *count*? It is equally wise to ask, what is the purpose of having a vote that *counts* if it is not *counted*? The answer to both questions is, there is no purpose.

Allow for Full and Unhindered Choice of All Candidates

Let us check off one more time: 1) We have voters that have a vote that counts, 2) we have voters that understand how to cast their vote that counts, 3) every vote that counts is cast correctly and is counted correctly, and 4) what difference does it make? If we are sitting back, very proud of our successfully meeting the first three responsibilities, we are doing a huge disservice to the voter and citizen.

A restrictive ballot – that is, a ballot that has obstacles so great and barriers so high in order for an independent or non-dominant party candidate to be listed – stands in dissonance with everything else which the Unites States stands: competition, freedom to choose, open markets, and so forth. We have a responsibility to give voters not only the power of a powerful vote, but the power of full and complete choice as well. We can do this with ballot access regulations that open the ballot to all legitimate candidates, with

ballot access regulations agreed to by an *all-partisan* board. Note that I am not using the word "viable" anywhere. The dominant parties, the mainstream news media, the Commission on Presidential Debates, the Public Broadcast System, and other organizations have abused the concept of a *viable* candidate by exercising an omniscient authority over democratic institutions in the United States. This takes us straight into our next responsibility to the voter.

Provide Ample Opportunity Through All Available Media Outlets for Voters to Learn About the Views and Ideas of All Candidates, Regardless of Party

The Natural Law Party, the Green Party, the Libertarian Party, the Constitution Party, the Reform Party, and other third or alternative political parties at the state and local level each have legitimate, unique and worthy-of-attention ideas for strengthening our society. The Commission on Presidential Debates in 2000 set a threshold in order for candidates to be included in the debates. A candidate had to show support averaged across five national news media organization polls of 5% or more. How does a candidate— presidential or otherwise--show support in the polls?

In order for a candidate to be in a debate, he needs to be supported. In order to be supported he needs to be known. In order to be known he needs to be in the debate or covered by the news media. In order to get some attention paid him by the news media he needs to be "newsworthy." In order to be newsworthy he needs support or money. In order to have money he needs to be supported or independently wealthy (and we all know that independent wealth is not a prerequisite for running for public office). To summarize this *third party cycle*, in order to be supported he needs to be in the news or in the debate,

neither of which will happen without money, which won't come without support, which won't come without exposure in the news or debate.

Democrats and Republicans ("Republicrats," as their detractors like to call), when asked why Ralph Nader (Green), John Hagelin (Natural Law), or Harry Browne (Libertarian) were not included in the 2000 debates, say that those candidates were not serious candidates. Should this not be a decision for the voters to make?

Make Full Use of Available Technologies to Meet the Above Responsibilities

We now have a fully informed voter with a powerful vote that will be counted correctly. How can we best see the previous sentence become a reality throughout the United States? We have the added responsibility to use all tools available to us to succeed.

As older and unreliable voting machines are scrapped we need to replace them with the most up-to-date technology – touch screens, and so forth. This new technology should be able to handle a ranked-ballot system, such as that used for Instant Runoff Voting, and the Single Transferable Vote.

The web and other communications tools need to be used to facilitate all-party debates, and dialogues. News media organizations on the web need to use their space to provide unbiased information about a candidate and his views, for every party and candidate.

Any use of advanced and advancing technologies for the purposes of meeting our responsibilities should not be an excuse for not, for example, providing candidate access to televised debates. In this and all things, we need to return to basics to understand from where we are coming, and to where we are going. Running 21st century elections and creating an all-partisan political environment requires acceptance of our responsibilities

to the 21st century voter. This can be achieved through smart use of technology, clear vision, and committed leadership from all of us.

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