

# Voter Bill of Rights

*In the United States, our electoral system is characterized by poor voter representation across the political spectrum, low voter registration and turnout, privately financed political campaigns, balkanized two party control, decentralized and partisan election administration and unreliable voting machines. To build a more just, transparent and participatory democracy, I support the following 10-point Voter Bill of Rights:*

## **There Shall Be a Constitutional Amendment Confirming the Right to Vote**

"The individual citizen has no federal constitutional right to vote for electors for the President of the United States," (Bush v. Gore, 531 U.S. 98, 104 (2000)); rather, each state individually sets and regulates state voting policies and has the exclusive authority to independently assign presidential electors. The lack of an individual guarantee blocks legal redress of many voting irregularities and discrepancies across the nation. Only a constitutional amendment would give every citizen who is eighteen years of age or older the much-needed individual affirmative citizenship right to vote. In addition, it would guard against practices that disenfranchise minority voters, prisoners and District of Columbia voters. While states may have their own rights for local elections, choosing a President is a national enterprise that should involve the full diversity of the voting public.

## **There Shall Be Independent, Non-Partisan and Transparent Election Administration**

Currently in the U.S., the majority of election functions are carried-out by officials linked to a political party, often actively engaged in running for office or campaigning for party candidates at same time that they are responsible for the administration of the elections. A famous example is Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris, the co-chair of George W. Bush's Florida campaign, who ran Florida's election in 2000. In 2004, the Secretaries of State in Missouri, Ohio and Michigan were all co-chairs of their state's Bush re-election campaigns, including Matt Blunt (Missouri) who ran for Governor and thus oversaw his own election.

Determining who can vote, how they can vote, where they can vote and the type and number of voting machines that will be available in their precinct should not be in the hands of partisan officials. Election administrators must conduct themselves in a neutral and transparent manner. Voter confidence and participation will be enhanced when election officials and poll workers are selected on a non-partisan basis.

## **There Shall Be an Auditable, Voter-Verifiable Paper Record for All Electronic and Electronically Tabulated Voting Systems**

It's simple: For voters to have confidence that their vote is being counted — correctly — we must guarantee every touch-screen voting machine in the U.S. be equipped to produce and store an auditable, voter-verified paper record of every vote cast which is the official ballot for purposes of recounts and audits. In addition, each machine must be equipped with open source coding to allow system transparency. Corporations, and their employees, that manufacture voting machine software and hardware and count the votes should refrain from political involvement.

## **There Shall be Boter Registration With Clear National Standards, Including an Election Day Registration Option for All Citizens**

In the 1840s, the national Election Day was set to make voting easier for farmers. Currently, however, working people are forced to choose between standing in a long voting line or making it to work on time. It is the responsibility of the government to reflect the needs of the modern working person, and once again make voting is easier. In most established democracies the onus is on an independent election commission or the government to register voters. In those countries, universal voter registration is set in place so that every citizen is automatically registered to vote when they turn 18. The six states that have incorporated Election Day Registration (EDR), which is the only thing close to universal voter registration in the U.S., lead the country in voter participation and highlight one basic solution to a more participatory democracy. Additionally, uniform standards for voter identification policies, universal registration procedures and deadlines and establishing Election Day as a national holiday would ensure higher voter turnout in all 50 states.

## **There Shall be Sniform National Standards to Ensure Equal Application of Voting Equipment and Processes**

There is no single voting procedure in the United States. Rather, over 3,000 counties and more than 13,000 voting jurisdictions

use a patchwork of federal, state and local laws to execute elections. Consequently, there are separate and unequal laws that help to disenfranchise millions of voters each election. To increase voter participation, Congress should establish minimum national standards for voting systems, allocation of voting equipment, ballot design, training and selection of poll workers and for removing registrants from voting rolls.

### **There Shall be Public Financing of Election Campaigns and Equal Media Access for All Eligible Candidates**

In today's system, where the amount a candidate spends usually determines the likelihood of success, it is not surprising that many citizens conclude that politicians are more concerned with campaign contributors than with needs and concerns of the average voter. The current private campaign finance system produces candidates who are more responsive to corporations and wealthy individuals than to ordinary citizens. We need to establish full public financing of campaigns and free access to public airwaves for bona fide candidates. In addition, licensed broadcasters should be required to carry debates and provide equal air-time to all qualified candidates.

### **There Shall be Instant Runoff Voting and Proportional Representation**

In one visit to the polls, instant runoff voting (IRV) ensures a winning candidate will receive a majority of votes rather than a simple plurality — as in most U.S. elections. IRV allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference (first, second, third choice and so on). If no candidate gets a majority of first choices, a runoff count can be conducted without the need for a second election thereby saving taxpayers' money. IRV is not new, it's a time-tested, successful voting method that has been used around the world: Ireland uses IRV to elect its president, Australia to elect its House of Representatives, and San Francisco to elect its mayor and other major city offices.

"Winner-take-all" is a very undemocratic way to choose representatives to government. Why should 49% of voters in a legislative district get 0% representation? Most democracies in the world use some form of proportional representation to choose legislatures. If one quarter of the voters supports a particular party, they should be able to elect roughly a quarter of the seats in a city council or legislature. The majority of voters will elect the majority of seats but minorities will get their fair share of representation.

### **There Shall be Access to the Ballot and to Public Forums for All Eligible Candidates Regardless of Party Affiliation.**

Our current system eclipses the voices of candidates who do not belong to one of the two dominant parties. Third party and independent candidates face a host of institutional barriers — from access to the ballot to inclusion of their views in debates and in media reports. These barriers sideline discussion of important policies not taken up by major-party campaigns, dampen competition and provide fewer choices for voters. Prohibitive ballot access requirements should be dropped and debates should be open to all ballot-qualified candidates. These vital reforms will raise the diversity of candidates and consequently increase voter participation.

### **There Shall be Fair Redistricting Policies that are More Competitive and Representative of the Electorate**

The current partisan system for districting allows and, in fact, encourages the current party in power to reshape districts in a manner that maintains and solidifies its power. The major political parties are working to safe-guard Congressional and state legislative districts; consequently, more than 85% of House incumbents won by landslide majorities of more than 60% and 98.2 % of incumbents were re-elected in 2004. When elected officials design their districts they are in-turn deciding whom they would like to represent. This is inherently undemocratic. We must work to take the redistricting process out of the hands of partisan politicians to establish fair criteria in order to prevent both malapportionment and gerrymandering.

### **There Shall be Direct Election of the President; Abolish the Electoral College**

Some 200 million eligible voters do not elect the President — 538 electors do. The outdated Electoral College distorts presidential campaigns by giving unequal weight to votes cast in different parts of the country. By making state elections winner-take-all affairs, it effectively diminishes the importance of "safe states" and amplifies the significance of "swing states." It's time to end the safe state/swing state dichotomy and make all votes equal, no matter the state of the voter. We need a constitutional amendment to elect The President by direct, popular vote. As a first step, reformers should amend their state laws to proportionally award their electors.