

Nader'08 Gonzalez

ISSUE STATEMENT Political – Electoral Reform

To illustrate how little has changed in four years, other than conditions becoming worse, the 2008 Nader/Gonzalez campaign is posting these policy positions on various injustices, necessities, and redirections that were prepared initially for the 2004 Nader/Camejo campaign. Such a short historical context should give our supporters and viewers an even greater sense of urgency to stop the corporate interests' and the corporate governments' autocratic control -- and the resulting deterioration -- of our society and country.

Electoral Reform that Creates a Vibrant, Active, Participatory Democracy

Our democracy is in a descending crisis. Voter turnout is among the lowest in the western world. Redistricting ensures very few incumbents are at risk in one-party districts. Barriers to full participation of candidates proliferate making it very obstructive, for most third party and Independent candidates to run. Obstacles, and deliberate manipulations to undermine the right to vote, for which penalties are rarely imposed, are preventing voters from voting. New paperless voting machines are raising questions about whether we can trust that our votes are being counted as they are cast. Finally, money dominates expensive campaigns, mainly waged on television in sound bite format. The cost of campaigns creates a stranglehold making politics a game for only the rich or richly funded. Major electoral reforms are needed to ensure that every vote counts, all voters are represented through electoral reforms like instant run-off voting, none-of-the-above options, and proportional representation, non-major party candidates have a chance to run for office and participate in debates, and that elections are publicly financed.

Instant Run-off Voting

Instant Run-off Voting (IRV) is an approach that needs to be tested at the local level and, if successful, applied to state and national elections as well. The US electoral system is in crisis; less than half the potential voters vote - the lowest in the western, industrialized world. The winner-take-all election system often pushes voters to vote their fears and not their beliefs. We have not had a President win an election with majority support of voters since the first President Bush. It undermines the perceived voter mandate of the government to have a president with less than majority support of actual votes. IRV may help fix both of these problems and allow more voters to vote for the candidates they support. Nobody knows how IRV will actually work in the United States - no matter what its fervent supporters may hope for. It has to be tested and also clarified within the context of local, state and national campaign funding laws.

On June 14, 2004, the Ferndale, MI City Council unanimously voted for a proposal to place IRV on the November 2004 ballot. The proposal would amend the city's charter to use IRV in future mayoral elections. A citizen's group, Ferndale for Instant Run-off Voting, asserts that with IRV the winner always has a majority vote and minor-party and independent candidates are no longer viewed as "spoilers," unfair as that sneeringly selective noun is in our rigged two party system.

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Instant Run-off Voting allows voters to rank their vote -- voters indicate a one for a first choice, two for a second choice, and three for a third choice. This simple but ground-breaking advance in elections ensures that in an election with more than two candidates, your vote can count for your second choice if your first choice can't win. Here's how it works: if a candidate receives a majority of first choices, that candidate wins. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and a second round of counting occurs wherein the eliminated candidate's votes go to each voter's next choice. Rounds of counting continue until there is a majority winner.

Advances for IRV are being made around the world and around the United States. In 2002 San Franciscans voted 55%-45% to adopt instant runoff voting. A Vermont League of Women Voters proposal to use instant runoff voting for statewide elections was debated in over 50 town meetings in 2002; of the 51 towns reporting results, 49 supported adoption of instant runoff voting, most by overwhelming margins. And Oakland, California voted 75.9 to 24.0 in favor of IRV on March 5, 2002 but it has not yet been implemented. IRV is used in major elections in Australia, Ireland and Great Britain. A few examples:

- This spring, the Utah Republican Party made effective use of IRV at its state convention in battles for the gubernatorial and congressional nomination.
- San Francisco is in the process of educating voters on the use of IRV for use in this November's seven Board of Supervisors district elections. The use of IRV, backers say, will have a big impact on voter turnout which has been declining.

As former Independent candidate John Anderson said in an article about the Ralph Nader 2004 Independent campaign: "Having an election between two candidates is obviously better than a one-party dictatorship, but having an election among more than two candidates is better than a two-party duopoly." He went on to highlight how Ross Perot's candidacy increased voter interest in the presidential election and how that was healthy for our democracy. Anderson concluded: "With Instant Run-off Voting, we would determine a true majority winner in one election and banish the spoiler concept. Voters would not have to calculate possible perverse consequences of voting for their favorite candidate. They could vote their hopes, not their fears."

Let us see. Let some demonstrations begin so we can find out what we don't know.

For more information visit:

- The Center on Voting and Democracy
- Ferndale for Instant Runoff Voting
- Instant Runoff Voting (A project of the Midwest Democracy Center)
- Reclaim Democracy
- Massachusetts Citizens for Instant Runoff Voting
- Citizens for Instant Runoff Voting in New York State

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Paperless Electronic Voting

A bedrock of democracy is making sure that every vote counts. The counting of votes needs to be transparent so people can trust that their vote is counted as they cast it. Paperless electronic voting on touch screen machines does not provide confidence to ensure votes are counted the way voters intend. The software on which votes are counted is protected as a corporate trade secret and the software is so complex that if malicious code was embedded no analysis could discover it. Further, because there is no voter verified paper record, it is not possible to audit the electronic vote for accuracy, nor is it possible to conduct an independent recount. This Primary Day six million voters will be voting on paperless electronic voting machines. This is a grotesquely designed, over-complicated expensive system fraught with the potential for mistakes and undetected fraud.

On July 23, 2003 the Johns Hopkins Information Security Institute reviewed the electronic voting system in Maryland and found that it had security far below even the most minimal security standards Johns Hopkins computer security experts concluded: If we do not change the process of designing our voting systems, we will have no confidence that our election results will reflect the will of the electorate.

Computers are inherently subject to programming error, equipment malfunction, and malicious tampering. If we are to ensure fair and honest elections, and retain voter confidence in our democratic process, we need to ensure that there are no such questions. Therefore, it is crucial that any computerized voting system provide a voter-verifiable paper audit trail and that random audits of electronic votes be conducted on Election Day. Paperless electronic voting machines make it impossible to safeguard the integrity of our vote thereby threatening the very foundation of our democracy.

The seller of the machines, the Diebold Corporation, is a supplier of money to one of the major party candidates, George W. Bush. The CEO and top officers of Diebold are major contributors to the Bush campaign. This does not pass the smell test. Voters should report immediately any suspected malfunctions and deficiencies at voting precincts around the country to their Board of Elections. And voters should urge their legislators to require a voter verified paper ballot trail for random audits and independent recounts.

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Ralph Nader's Statement on Blanket Primary Initiatives

Initiatives in California (Proposition 62) and Washington State (Initiative 872) play into the dislike of the two parties but manipulate voters into blocking non-major party choices and entrenching major party candidates.

The two initiatives would create a blanket non-partisan primary whereby all candidates would be included. The top two contenders would be the only two included on the November ballot. While a primary for all candidates is tempting to voters because it seems to subordinate political parties, the result will be to prevent non-major party candidates from being on the ballot in November.

The initiatives were bankrolled by the insurance, finance, development and banking industries as well as John Walton of Wal-Mart. These initiatives will increase the costs of campaigns since candidates would have to run in what amounts to two general elections. Through direct mail, radio and television advertising candidates will need to communicate with all voters in two general elections. This will dramatically increase costs. The likely beneficiaries will be wealthy candidates denying persons of modest means the opportunity to offset the money advantages of a wealthy candidate.

In jurisdictions where one party dominates it is likely that the two final candidates will be from the same party. Thus, entrenched interests and virtual one-party jurisdictions will be created. At the same time, third party and independent candidates will be at a disadvantage because name recognition, major funding and party machinery would be essential in the "primary." Insulating the top two political parties from competition eliminates an important check and balance on their political power.

Jesse Ventura, who has come out against the approach, points out, It is no surprise to me that big money is behind Proposition 62, and its efforts eliminate real choice for the voters in upcoming California Elections. If passed, Proposition 62 will prevent minor parties from appearing on the November ballot. This is because only the top two vote getters in the Primary Election will emerge to the General Election in November.

Ventura added, In Minnesota, September 1998, I only received 3% of the primary vote in the race for Governor. Despite these numbers I went on to win the general election in November. Under Proposition 62 "I would have been excluded from the general election in November and never would have been able to serve as Governor of Minnesota."

The solution to the problems in the anemic U.S. democracy is more choices and voices not less. Restricting the ballot to only two candidates will limit voter choice to the point of repressing other voices outright. Nader opposes these initiatives.

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Statehood for DC!

More than 500,000 people live in the District of Columbia. As the capital of this nation, the District is the symbol of freedoms for which that nation stands. The light of democracy shines from the District, but does not illuminate this city. The core is hollow. The values of equality and political participation that the city promises are denied right here, in our nation's capital.

Most Americans do not know, and many would find it hard to believe, that under our current system D.C. residents are second-class citizens. The District is denied local control Congress must approve the District's budget, and can override any action of the city government. At the same time, District residents do not even have one voting representative in the Congress that controls them. D.C. is effectively a colony, with all local decisions directly subject to change by a Congress largely out of touch with local realities.

Most people who live outside of the District do not know that D.C. citizens pay about \$2 billion a year in federal income taxes more than several states yet cannot elect people to decide how their money is spent. D.C. residents have served and died in our armed forces over the last half century in disproportionately high numbers, but have no representation in the Congress that decides whether or not to go to war. The U.S. is the only democracy in the world that deprives the residents of its capital city the basic rights granted to other citizens.

Even more damaging than the lack of the congressional representation is the colonial-style control that Congress exerts over the District. Adding one, or three, D.C. representatives to the 535 members of Congress would, by itself, do little to solve this problem.

Unaccountable power is by its nature abusive. The places where unaccountable power is exercised are, and must be, dysfunctional. Unaccountable power is uninformed. Members of Congress don't know this city. They don't know what's right for its people. They approve the budget and all the legislation, but they do not themselves have to live with their decisions. They foist pet projects on citizens who are perfectly capable of deciding these issues locally. They prevent the District from taxing income where it is earned. They regularly overturn the judgment of local elected officials on public health, tax, budget, school issues all with impunity.

Unaccountable power is destructive. It chokes the ability and destroys the responsibility of people to govern themselves. There is no place in the world where second-class citizens who live side by side with first-class citizens and fare as well. It just doesn't happen. What happens to a community where the people cannot exercise authority, where there is no democracy? People stop participating. They don't run for local offices. The civic culture of the community withers away.

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The results of Congressional interference and the inefficiency of colonial-style management are distressing as they are predictable. Poverty has increased during a time of economic expansion, with the percentage of residents in poverty going from 16.6 % in 1988 to 22.1 % in 1998. Even more astonishing was the growth in income inequality. The richest 20 % of D.C. residents earned 16.4 times as much as the poorest 20 % in the late 80s and 27.1 times as much in the late 90s.

The voters of the District of Columbia should be allowed to hold a referendum to choose their future status.

Local control is what will make it possible for the District to start fixing its problems. With legislative and appropriations delays, regular governing confusion, and congressional interference eliminated, the District would be more able to deal with its pressing problems. The solution for the problems of democracy is more democracy!

Ralph Nader Favors Youth Voting: Lowering the Voting Age to 16

Ralph Nader favors lowering the voting age to 16 years old. He recognizes that 16 year olds work, pay taxes and more and more often are subjected to criminal laws passed that treat them like adults. In addition, democracy in the United States needs to be re-invigorated. Allowing youth the right to vote will increase voter participation, not only of 16 to 18 year olds, but also in the longer term as youth are taught at an early age the importance of voting. With this change in law Ralph also favors increased instruction in school about civics, government and the importance of voting. Some say youth are not smart enough to vote, so rather than explaining all the very good reasons for allowing the youth vote, Ralph believes it is best to let youth speak for themselves.

"At the founding of our nation, only rich, white, land-owning men over the age of twenty-one could vote. Later, it was any white man over twenty-one. Following the Civil War, the Fifteenth Amendment gave the vote to African American men. Next, in 1920, women's suffrage finally paid off with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Finally, in 1970 the voting age was lowered to 18 due to the counter-cultural movements of the 1960's. Over hundreds of years, the vote has spread from the clutches of an elite few to an ever-greater percentage of the population. Youth are simply the next item on the timeline of Democracy's growth." - "Youth Suffrage," Brad Vogel, *Between the Lines*, <http://www.btlmag.org/>

"What kind of twisted message do we send when we tell youth they are judged mature, responsible adults when they commit murder, but silly, brainless kids when they want to vote? This is a double standard, no different than during the Vietnam War. War isn't a dead issue now either, leaders who youth can't vote for today may send them to war tomorrow. Lowering the voting age is the just, fair way to set things straight." -NYRA, National Youth Rights Association, youthrights.org

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"For several reasons lowering the voting age will increase voter turnout. It is common knowledge that the earlier in life a habit is formed the more likely that habit or interest will continue throughout life. If attempts are made to prevent young people from picking up bad habits, why are no attempts made to get youth started with good habits, like voting? If citizens begin voting earlier, and get into the habit of doing so earlier, they are more likely to stick with it through life.

"Not only will turnout increase for the remainder of young voter's lives, the turnout of their parents will increase as well: 'A 1996 survey by Bruce Merrill, an Arizona State University journalism professor, found a strong increase in turnout. Merrill compared turnout of registered voters in five cities with Kids Voting with turnout in five cities without the program. Merrill found that between five and ten percent of respondents reported Kids Voting was a factor in their decision to vote. This indicated that 600,000 adults nationwide were encouraged to vote by the program.'" -John Stuart Hall, "Elections and Civic Education, the Case of Kids Voting USA," *National Civic Review*, Spring 1998, 79.

"When the USA was founded, suffrage was restricted to white male landowners. Over time, it was extended to non-landowners, women, lower-class people (through the elimination of the poll tax), and minority races. There are no longer any groups whose voting rights are automatically denied except for people under 18. It's a matter of social progress. When other groups demanded the right to vote, many treated their cause with hesitation or ridicule, but eventually social progress prevailed. But the evolution of suffrage is not complete until it is extended to everyone who deserves it, and we're working to move closer to that goal." -Teen Vote, <http://teenvote.us/why>

Proposal to Lower Voting Age, on the Web at : <http://youthrights.org/voteproposal.php>