

Thinking Outside the (Ballot) Box: A Broader Political Engagement Strategy for America’s Civic Organizations

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In recent years, there has been an expanding chorus of voices decrying the demise of civic engagement among Americans, particularly their lack of interest in voting and other political processes. Although not the only catalyst for this alarm, Robert Putnam, who documented the trend in “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”¹—the journal article that presaged the eponymous book launching a thousand projects and articles dedicated to increasing civic engagement—continues to be one of the most prominent identified with it.

Putnam and others have used compelling data to depict a citizenry that is cynical about and disinterested in traditional political institutions—particularly young people, who are less likely to vote. According to recent data, during the presidential election years between 1972 and 2000 the national youth voter turnout rate declined by 13 percentage points (among eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old voters).² Young people are also not as interested in political discussion and public issues as past generations were at a similar point in their lives.³ Although we can expect that young people, as happened for their elders, will become more interested in the news and vote more as they move through their twenties and thirties, because they are starting at a considerably lower level of interest than earlier generations did it is likely that political participation in the United States will continue to decline in the future.

These facts and many others regarding Americans’ lack of excitement about government and political processes have been well documented and analyzed by political scientists, journalists, scholars, and oth-

ers who have since been attempting to find ways to stanch this flow of apathy. Among the most popular strategies employed in recent years by civic organizations are voter registration, voter mobilization, and get-out-the-vote efforts. Such strategies make sense. Voting is the cornerstone of American democracy; it is a concrete action that citizens can take to be civically engaged; and it is measurable. These strategies are also particularly effective during a presidential election year, when most people are likely to tune in to campaigns and turn out to vote. They are appropriate and necessary activities for civic organizations—a cornerstone of a healthy democracy—to undertake.

But what happens *after* the election? There is no evidence that once this election year has passed—one in which experts have predicted a higher turnout because important issues, including the economy and a war, are at stake—people (young or otherwise) will continue to be interested in politics or government, let alone vote in an off-year election. Yes, data shows that once people vote they are more likely to vote again, but if they do so reluctantly or continue to be cynical about politics or government in general, are they really civically engaged? Moreover, is voting really civic engagement, when all that is required is that people show up at the polls, vote every few years, and perhaps stay informed in between these times? Are these same voters engaged in their communities, engaged in what Harry Boyte calls “public work” or community problem solving?⁴

These issues are worth deeper exploration since compelling data indicate that our next generation of

leaders are not bound by the same sense of duty as are our elders in matters of voting and participation in political processes (although it is important to point out that young people do have a strong sense of duty to community and country, as evidenced in their interest in community service and voluntarism). Nor is it necessarily fair to young people to assume that they should be interested in politics or political processes, since younger Americans have not been part of hard-fought battles to win the right to vote and have grown up at a time when their parents and other adults with whom they spend their time have also become disenchanted with traditional politics, as the continuing decline in the voting rate across age groups indicates.

Are voters engaged in their communities, engaged in what Harry Boyte calls “public work” or community problem solving?

Today, Americans see a system that is deeply flawed, dominated by big-money interests and political consultants. They see campaigns rife with spin and hypocrisy rather than substance and nuance. They see government as a bloated bureaucracy that, compared to other institutions (including the private sector), fails to get results that matter. As a recent *New York Times* editorial notes, “Many of the voters who go to the polls may ask themselves why they bothered to show up.”⁵

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Changes in the System

Although some may dismiss all of this as nothing more than Americans’ longstanding penchant to perceive politics as contentious, corrupt, and unresponsive, others assert that there have in fact been

demonstrable changes in how political campaigns are conducted in recent years and that they have prohibited, rather than encouraged, more citizen participation, including voting.

The Extent to Which Money Controls the System

Currently, whether candidates are able to run and win depends on how much money they raise. Today, there is more money flowing into campaign coffers than any time in history. During the 2000 elections, regulated federal campaign contributions reached a record of \$3 billion, which does not include political money contributed outside the existing system of regulation or monies spent on state and local elections. The average U.S. Senate race in 2002 cost approximately \$5 million and the average House seat \$900,000.⁶ The candidates who spent the most money won 98 percent of the House races in 2002 and 85 of the Senate races.⁷ It is no longer unthinkable to spend more than \$60 million on a U.S. Senate race (Jon Corzine) or \$70 million on a mayoral race (Michael Bloomberg). The McCain-Feingold legislation is a harbinger of reform from this kind of spending, but candidates are still allowed to opt out of public financing; thus President Bush is expected to raise close to \$200 million dollars for the 2004 race.⁸ The result: many officeholders, tired of begging for dollars, are retiring and fewer would-be officeholders are considering running.

The Television Industry’s Dependence on Campaign Ads for Revenue

According to the Alliance for Better Campaigns, a nonprofit advocacy group focused on campaign-related television advertising, expenditures on broadcast television ads among candidates have been rising at a breakneck pace for the past two decades. During 2002, for example, nearly \$1 billion was spent on these ads—nearly four times what was spent in 1982, even after adjusting for inflation. Further, studies show that stations around the country increased the price of these ads by an average of more than 53 percent in the two months before the

2002 election, despite a thirty-year-old federal law enacted to prevent such preelection profiteering.⁹ The result: candidates have to raise more money for ads that cost even more during the time they need to air them, contributing to the vicious cycle of exorbitant campaign spending that has proliferated in recent years.

Media coverage of candidates and campaigns has become little more than sound bites and stories about candidates' slipups, leaving no room for substantive discussion about the issues or the candidates' positions on them. The insatiable media scrutiny of candidates, the news media's penchant for focusing on the negative aspects of these individuals as well as the political organizations they represent, and the skewing of coverage to the "horse-race" angle (who's ahead and who's not) have contributed to Americans' sense of cynicism about the political process (nearly half of them get their news about campaigns from local television or nightly network news shows).

This is particularly true among young people, who are the most media-savvy generation in history and as such able to see through the spin that dominates most of what passes for debate, even when presented via the most traditional venues. Just 23 percent of Americans age eighteen to twenty-nine say they regularly learn something about the election from the nightly network news, down from 39 percent in 2000.¹⁰ Instead, young people are more likely to tune into programs such as Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" to get their evening news, which provides young people with a highly entertaining, yet incisively knowing, exposé of the ins and outs of Washington. In fact, one of every two young people under age thirty say they at least *sometimes* learn about campaigns from comedy shows, nearly twice the rate among people age thirty to forty-nine (27 percent).¹¹ The ironic tone of these shows and their acknowledgment of young people as smart to reject what is spoon-fed to them by the candidates and their consultants is what attracts millions of these

viewers to their ranks. The result: despite the shows' attempts to enlighten young viewers about government through entertainment, it may further increase their view that the institution is outdated, corrupt, and inefficient.

There is also a legitimate argument that what passes for political debate in this country has become nothing more than an opportunity for candidates to practice their sound bites. Most televised debates, for example, have become media events featuring "celebrity" journalists who are rarely given the chance to ask follow-up questions when candidates evade the original queries with stump speeches. Young people, who might be particularly good at this task since they tend to demand authenticity, are also rarely the questioners in these events; even when they are, their questions tend to be screened in advance for humor or ratings potential—as was the case with the Rock the Vote event televised on CNN this past year. The result: young people and others who are particularly adept at seeing through spin and tag lines—and who want substance—turn off and tune out.

The Growth in Power and Influence of Political Consultants

Curtis Gans, head of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, blames consultants for the "conduct of campaigns . . . [because of their use of] thirty-second attack ads that vilify all the candidates and create a miasma over the political system and invite people not to vote for particular candidates or not to vote at all."¹² Former California Gov. Jerry Brown sees consultants as transforming candidates into spokespeople rather than individuals with original ideas. Christie Todd Whitman agrees, writing in a recent *New York Times* op-ed how the advice from consultants is always to "appeal to your base," rather than to a majority of the electorate.¹³ Candidates then tailor their appeals to those who already agree with them, with the inevitable outcome being rhetoric that precludes a sensible discussion of issues. As a result, she notes, "those with the

most shrill voices are increasingly dominating our political discourse.” The result: moderates, who constitute the majority of the electorate, are left out of the debate and ultimately given little reason to vote for any candidate.

A Growing Lack of Competition in Elections

“What sets democracies apart is offering real choices in elections,” says the *New York Times*, “something that is increasingly rare in the United States.”¹⁴ During 2002, 80 of the 435 House races did not even include candidates from both major parties, and 81 incumbents ran unopposed by a major party candidate.¹⁵ Further, Congressional races with outcomes in real doubt were rare; nearly 90 percent of these races had a margin of victory of 10 percentage points or more.¹⁶

There are two major reasons for this. First, the United States continues to use antiquated redistricting processes that allow parties in power to redraw district voting lines so as to assure them the most votes. This practice has long been used by both parties to their advantage, but it has become more pernicious with the advent of technology, which allows districts to be created with “surgical precision, taking into account not just party registration but also voting history.”¹⁷ As a result, line drawers have “become adept at drawing districts to exclude the homes of rival candidates. The populace ends up stuck with the candidates the dominant party inflicts on them, and once those candidates are elected, they, as incumbents, usually have life tenure.”¹⁸ As Jeffrey Toobin notes, “the voters no longer select the members of the House of Representatives; the state legislators who design the districts do.”¹⁹

The second major factor that contributes to lack of real competition in races is the laws that most states have on their books that make it difficult, if not almost impossible, for third-party candidates or independents to run for office. At the same time, there is evidence that Americans are willing and wanting to consider alternative voices. Ross Perot,

Jessie Ventura, and Ralph Nader are just a few of those who have run races as independents and attracted a significant level of voter (and nonvoter) attention. Yet stringent ballot access requirements continue to be imposed on these and other third-party or independent candidates seeking to have their names listed on the ballot. These candidates often have to get the signatures of an enormous number of voters before the state will consider listing them on the ballot, at the same time Democratic and Republican candidates are often largely—if not completely—exempt from these requirements. The United States, in fact, has some of the most stringent ballot access requirements of any democracy in the world.²⁰

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This situation is exacerbated by a tendency among many political leaders—the same who tout the virtues of a participatory democracy—to scoff at independent, third-party or other candidates perceived as something other than bona fide Democrats or Republicans, suggesting that democracy is somehow the realm only of those already in the club. The level of concerns and questions expressed by pundits and others—for example, about whether Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jessie Ventura, Pat Buchanan, and Ralph Nader should run or could govern—suggests a view that these individuals were seen as having little right to participate in a process that is the very embodiment of choice.

Ironically, the American public seems to think otherwise, since many of these same individuals have incited more interest and participation in politics than candidates with more traditional credentials. As Hendrick Hertzberg, writes, the Schwarzenegger campaign became “a pretty good exercise in American democracy. The attention of the public

and press was riveted . . . the issues got a thorough airing. And voter turnout was high—twenty percent higher than in the regular gubernatorial election the year before.”²¹ One does not have to be a rocket scientist to figure out why people turn out for candidates like these: they cut through the spin and eschew being overly “handled” by consultants, they look and talk like real people rather than policy wonks, they focus on issues that people care about, and they emit a genuine interest in serving rather than padding their resume. In short: Americans want some fresh voices—and will turn out for them, but they are stymied by a system that prohibits those voices from turning up on the roster of candidates and that might encourage more people to be more engaged in politics.

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Asking the Right Question

Given these trends, a focus on “getting people to vote” may be the wrong strategy since it starts from the assumption that we can and should force people to simply avert their gaze from (where it already lies upon) these unpleasant realities to seeing the system the way we would like it to be or the way we think it was as part of some romantic vision of democracy. Perhaps a better question, therefore, is, What is the incentive to vote and how can we work to change the system so that there is an incentive to vote?

This question is, admittedly, more difficult because it raises complex questions about our system of democracy and to what degree we think it could or should be changed to allow the kind of participation so many claim to desire. As a result, it has become easier to simply put the onus on nonparticipants by asking them to participate in the very activities or

systems—such as voting—they see as flawed. In short, the message to nonparticipants is “You don’t like the system? Too bad. Deal with it and vote anyway” rather than “You don’t like the system? Change it!” To those who would scoff at the latter as unrealistic or unfeasible, it might be fair to ask who the real cynics are: those who ask what kind of system we could have to engage our citizenry more fully or those who, as William Rubenstein, writes, “argue [only] about what our structure of government will permit.”²²

In short, voting is only one part—and a small one—of the larger equation, but in public discussions about “how to increase civic or political engagement” it often becomes the central and only piece. A larger and broader reform agenda through which civic organizations at the national and local levels could help galvanize an apathetic electorate and encourage true civic and political engagement among all citizens, including young people, is rarely discussed, and when it is it is usually relegated to the purview of “good government” groups or issue-specific organizations focused on campaign finance or ballot access reform agendas.

Why Broader Reform, and Why Now?

Perhaps therefore it is now time to think outside the ballot box and instead create a vision of broader system reform that involves the very people who have eschewed that system. Why now? Turnout in the upcoming election may be higher than normal, so there is an opportunity to capitalize on this interest in politics. At the same time, there is no guarantee that this will be the case in subsequent years, so the moment must be grabbed or it might be lost. Millions of young Americans were energized by the Howard Dean campaign, for example, but this does not mean that they will necessarily be flocking to the Democratic party.

At the same time, young people are dedicated to making a difference in their communities—a trend

that might be seen as a potential force to mobilize for making a difference in the political system. As E. J. Dionne has noted, young people's civic-mindedness and commitment to direct service may better equip them to sort out "the conundrums of democracy" than their immediate predecessors since "the great reforming generations are the ones that marry the aspirations of service to the possibilities of politics and harness the good work done in local communities to transform a nation." Thus, rather than wring our hands over the "sorry state of youth" or pandering or admonishing them, Dionne suggests that we treat young people as a "community of serious citizens" attempting to respond to serious challenges through new models that they have developed and through strategies that encourage youth to live up to their own social commitments so they can reform a system that is not quite working.²³

Some have therefore called for more support for youth organizing and alternative forms of youth political engagement around issues; these are strategies that attempt to change the marginal social and political status of youth and respond to their particular style of participation, which is less focused on charismatic leadership at the national level than on collective and direct action that leads to results, preferably at the community level. Given rapid changes in society that require exactly this kind of leadership—one that moves from hierarchy to participatory, from individual to shared, from few to all, and from generic to specific—some believe that how young people are now approaching service in their communities may ultimately develop into a new way of doing politics at a larger level. In short, the way to engage young people may be to engage them in reforming the system.

Young people are not the only cohort, however, that might be ripe for mobilization around a broader political reform agenda. Today, there are also millions of Americans—35 percent of the electorate (50 percent of young people) see themselves as "independents"—who "balk at the idea of being catego-

rized," writes Jacqueline Salit, who want to "seek solutions to policy questions that are free of labels," and who would be eager to participate in political reform efforts.²⁴ Yet these voters continue to be perceived inaccurately as "swing voters" and wooed by consultants to one party or the other during an election and then quickly forgotten. This is a mistake, says Omar Ali, a visiting professor at Columbia University's Institute for Research in African American Studies and director of research at the Committee for a Unified Independent Party, since most independents "aren't interested in just switching parties . . . they're rejecting 'partyism' and all the constraints that come with it. At the end of the day any political direction that narrows the organizing of independents to party-building as an end in itself misses what [many] Americans are looking for."²⁵ Independents' historic role as drivers of reform—including the abolitionists, women's and civil rights advocates, and others—also make them a potential force for changing not only a system they see as damaged but the way and degree to which Americans are engaged.

They are not alone. Millions of Americans want something different and represent a potential for building a reform movement that goes beyond voting. Many people believe that Independent Sector, the League of Women Voters, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Common Cause, the National Civic League and other major associations are well positioned to help promulgate such a broader agenda. Representing thousands of organizations across the country working to enhance civil society—which includes engagement in our most fundamental democratic processes—these and other organizations have influence, power, and a voice that can help mobilize citizens to become engaged so as to result in real incentives for others to be engaged.

As Sirianni and Friedland argue forcefully, it is in fact these very organizations that should be the infrastructure of what they call a civic renewal

movement in the United States because they serve as “important nodes linking a broad range of other important movement actives and networks.” Yet they are still largely disassociated from one another, having not yet “developed a compelling enough set of rationales, incentives and activities that would respond to the concern that civic organizing networks invariably have, namely, how will a broader movement for civic renewal help in the work [they] already do and why should [they] commit scarce time and resources to building it?”²⁶ Sirianni and Friedland add that such organizations are not only the infrastructure behind the civic renewal movement; they are the foundation for a healthy democracy—but only if they are perceived as nonpartisan. “If movement networks are to extend to the broadest range of civic groups engaged in vital public work,” they write, “as well as into the heart of institutions where diverse stakeholders work to transform mission and practice, then the movement will need to maintain a principled, nonpartisan stance in relation to political parties and elected officials.”²⁷

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This raises the hackles of some progressives and conservatives, who question whether any kind of political reform can be effective if there are no goals attached to it. They wonder, “Political reform for *what?*” Sirianni and Friedland’s response is that asking this question too soon—before there are a range of civic groups engaged in vital public work that rises above partisan politics—dooms any larger civic renewal effort to failure. Asking such questions also misses the importance of collaborative community problem solving and public work that is the stuff of everyday civic politics. “Without a far richer basis of such work to build on—work that requires princi-

pled nonpartisanship—it is unclear how either [progressives, Democrats, conservatives, or Republicans] that have pursued their fractious advocacy agendas previously will be able to learn how to forge common purposes or new ways of doing politics.”²⁸ They assert that a revitalized democracy depends less on party or traditional politics and more on building nonpartisan capacities for community development, healthy communities, civic environmentalism, and universities with a civic mission—all part of a civic infrastructure that in turn then lays a foundation for more interest and involvement in politics and government. As Greenberg and Skocpol have written, “Civil society must be central to democratic renewal. Along with government at all levels, communities, religious institutions and business must be engaged as partners in a larger quest for the good society.”²⁹

Sirianni and Friedland add, however, that this does not mean that civic renewal or political reform should not or could not be linked to partisan politics; rather, this should be an indirect link. When membership organizations focus on facilitating “civic politics” by seeking out “collaborative opportunities across the spectrum of interests and ideologies to solve practical problems, build long-term relationships . . . and produce things of value to the commonwealth,”³⁰ they are better positioned to then facilitate links among these organizations with more political groups, parties, or constituencies. The latter are in turn better networked with those who share their views and goals.

A New Agenda to Encourage Political Involvement

What would a political reform agenda—with the goal of encouraging civic engagement—look like? Here are some of the most important components of this agenda.

Advocating for Campaign Finance Reform

Civic organizations should be speaking out about the need for campaign finance reform and encour-

aging their members to do likewise by supporting publicly funded elections in their states and communities. Already, there are promising examples of how such races work in Arizona and Maine, which increased the voter turnout rate with this type of financing system, derived largely from funds raised through individuals' contributions through the checkoff box on their tax return. Civic organizations could remind their members to use this option to support publicly funded elections, which would also help to level the playing field so that more people interested in running could do so—and in turn give Americans more and better choices in elections.

Educating Americans About What Government Does Do

Many Americans, especially young people, have little idea of the role government plays in their day-to-day lives, and what they do hear, for the most part, is negative. Public education campaigns and other efforts need to be undertaken to educate Americans about the beneficial contributions that local, state, and federal government make to families and communities: providing health and social services, overseeing public schools, building roads and highways, and so on. The subtext of these efforts is that “public” need not be synonymous with mediocre, and that privatization is not the answer to every problem. Indeed, the public sector, along with the private and nonprofit sectors, is an integral part of what some have referred to as the three-legged stool of democracy. Civic organizations should continue to try to seek new ways to collaborate with the other two sectors and promote this message of interdependence.

Exploring and Educating Americans About New Electoral Processes

There are new forms of electoral process, such as instant runoff voting, whereby people vote for their favorite candidate but also can indicate subsequent choices by ranking their preferences as 1, 2, or 3. With this process, a true majority winner is established and eliminates the spoiler concept.

Voters can also, as John Anderson writes, “vote their hopes, not their fears,” unlike our current winner-take-all system that led to the Bush-Gore debacle in 2000.³¹ Another process that can be advocated is proportional or full representation, in which like-minded groups of voters win legislative seats in better proportion to their share of the popular vote than in a winner-take-all election. Whereas the winner-take-all principle awards 100 percent of the representation to a 50.1 percent majority, full representation allows voters in a minority to win their fair share of representation alongside voters in the majority.

Sponsoring More Engaging and Lively Debates

Civic organizations can sponsor debates among the candidates—including third-party candidates—that involve as questioners people who are allowed to ask hard-hitting questions, and if candidates are evasive or respond with sound bites the questioners can be encouraged to follow up and demand more clarity and specificity. A variety of media venues need to be involved in this process—beyond the national networks, and different approaches should be used to attract a broader audience, particularly young people and those turned off by what now passes for political debate.

Encouraging People to Run for Office

Civic organizations should encourage their members—and their members' members—to run for political office at the local, state, or national level and provide venues for candidates from all parties to get their message out to the membership.

Advocating for Changes to Redistricting Procedures

Civic organizations can encourage members to become more educated about redistricting practices in their states and districts—practices that may be prohibiting more participation by keeping potential candidates from running for public office. Organizations need to speak out for reform in this area, specifically by calling for districts to be drawn

apolitically, perhaps using computer programs or nonpartisan commissions.

Speaking Out About the Lack of Substance in Media Coverage of Issues and Candidacies

Around the country, there are now numerous communities organizing to demand more choice in programming and in encouraging local networks to offer free airtime for candidate and issue coverage during an election period. Civic organizations could support this work by furnishing information to their members about these efforts and providing venues for connecting them.

Encouraging and Promoting Community Organizing Around Local Issues

Political engagement is not just about voting in a national election, or even a local election. It is also about communities coming together to advocate for things they care about and working to improve or change them. In many cases, such organizing leads to more political involvement. A group of neighbors cleaning up their park, for example, may be inspired to contact local elected officials to make sure the park stays clean, testify before the city council about the state of parks in their neighborhood, and pursue longer-term efforts to ensure the viability and quality of life in their community. Civic organizations, especially national groups, need to help nonprofits and other organizations understand the connection between electoral politics and community activism and why and how both forms of engagement are important and the functions they serve.

Young people particularly are heavily engaged in community service, which can be used as a springboard for deeper civic involvement, including activities that are more political in nature—among them, organizing around issues they care about. “Young people may not care about politics,” says Jon Zaff, director of 18-to-35, “but they do care passionately about issues” (personal communication, May 11, 2004). This energy needs to be directed and culti-

vated through programs and projects that allow young people to move from service to civics.

Encouraging and Promoting Better School-Based Civic Education

Given that schools have access to our next generation of citizens, they need to be viewed and brought in as important partners in any larger civic engagement effort. Although school-based civic education has declined significantly during the past thirty years (a decline that some correlate with the decrease in young people’s interest in voting and politics), it is recently reemerging as an important issue and one that several organizations are tackling at the district, state, and national levels. Unlike the traditional, dry, rote civics classes of yesterday, however, these new programs are linking classroom-based instruction in the fundamentals of democracy with experiential learning opportunities, many with local or state nonprofit organizations. Students are also encouraged to discuss policy issues in the classroom and are given time for reflection and analysis—practices that the data show help cultivate civic and political behavior, attitudes, and skills among young people.³² Civic organizations consequently have an opportunity to join ranks with these efforts; link nonprofits with schools; and help advocate for better and more comprehensive approaches to civic education in standards, testing, and curricula.

Sponsoring Public Discussions About the *Kinds of Systems We Do Want and That We Think Could Be More Effective*

Although many public discussions center on civic engagement, few of them attempt to look at a broader reform agenda—or at least tie the pieces together into a whole. Civic organizations can sponsor public dialogues asking important questions: “Which kinds of political system would make participation worthwhile?” “Which kinds of redistricting system do we want?” “What values would they reflect (for example, competitiveness, racial equality, and so on)?” “What are the pros and cons of instant

Organizations Supporting a Broader Strategy for Political Engagement

Alliance for Better Campaigns (www.bettercampaigns.org)
Washington, D.C.

Ballot Access News (www.ballot-access.org) San Francisco

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) (www.civicyouth.org) University of Maryland, College Park

Center for Responsive Politics (www.opensecrets.org)
Washington, D.C.

Center for Voting and Democracy (www.fairvote.org)
Washington, D.C.

Democracy 21 (www.democracy21.org) Washington, D.C.

Demos (www.demos-usa.org) New York

electionreform.org, Arlington, Va.

runoff voting?” “What kind of local organizing needs to be developed to lead to macro-level political reform?” These discussions must involve people representing all points of the political spectrum and promote more local experimentation, which civic organizations can showcase and support.

Conclusion

Because they are some of the largest institutions dedicated to the support and promotion of civil society, civic organizations such as the National Civic League, the League of Women Voters, Junior Leagues, and many others have a role to play in helping to link the civic infrastructure they represent with a broader agenda to encourage nonpartisan political engagement. What is needed is leadership willing to step up to the plate and deliver some admittedly complex but powerful messages to a wide and diverse audience hungry for new ideas, frankness, and energy. It is a challenge, to be sure, but one that if left unaddressed may portend even deeper disillusionment and disengagement with the democratic processes and institutions on which the United States was built.

What is needed is leadership willing to step up to the plate and deliver some admittedly complex but powerful messages to a wide and diverse audience hungry for new ideas, frankness, and energy.

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