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A Step for Voting Reform

[from the January 31, 2005 issue]

Something good for American democracy happened on January 6. In its first potentially decisive consideration of a challenge to a presidential election in 128 years, at least some members of Congress acknowledged the decrepit state of our election system and pledged to do something about it.

Now, as happened four years ago, with generally disappointing results, election reform is again on the table. We progressives must do our utmost to keep it there until real reform is won.

That will require making it a high priority and continuing the kind of effort and coordination among civil rights, labor and other constituencies that helped persuade Senator Barbara Boxer to join Representative Stephanie Tubbs Jones in not accepting Ohio's electors. Although in the end she and Tubbs Jones were unsuccessful in their quest, Boxer's action led many of her fellow senators to join her in condemning "a flawed system which must be fixed now."

Representative John Conyers, who as much as any one person deserves credit for January 6, has announced that he will soon be introducing an election reform bill. And, after years of talk, there is something approaching a consensus--at least among those interested in easy, accurate voting and fair campaigns--on the essential reforms that are needed.

Nationally, we want a floor on voting mechanics and rights. We want a national right to vote, ideally enshrined in the Constitution, to guard against voter suppression or other basic unfairness. We want universal registration, recognizable in every election district in the country, and multiple opportunities before election time to prove required residence. We want consistency in ballot design, and maximum ease of use. We also want consistent, nationwide rules on voter ID requirements and on how to count and recount ballots. We want every state and national election day to be a public holiday. We want nonpartisan election administration. We want computer voting technology that can be examined by people outside the companies providing it and a secure paper trail on all votes cast. We want a nonpartisan national election commission--populated by recognized experts in voting machine technology, statistical analysis and polling, and national and comparative politics--to evaluate the accuracy and representativeness of our election performance regularly and make recommendations for improvement. We want Congress to come back to election reform as an issue in each session. And, however long it takes, we want to abolish the Electoral College and move to direct election of the President.

Adopting such an agenda would be only a start. Beyond this, we want people to be able to enter the

electoral fray based on the content of their ideas, accomplishments and character, not the size of their wallets or those of people to whom they are beholden. We want a more democratic system of campaign finance at both the federal and the state levels, enough public funding to insure basic competitiveness, a ban on for-profit broadcasters charging money for campaign ads, and ample public means to communicate with the people.

Finally, we want fairly designed Congressional districts. While being required to respect the one-person, one-vote principle, states should again be free to design Congressional districts as they see fit (as they were through most of America's history, up to 1967). If they want single-member districts and winner-take-all rules, let them have them. But if they want to move to versions of plural nomination (*aka* "fusion" of the sort the New Party fought for and New York's Working Families Party thrives on), instant runoff voting or more classic proportional representation, let them do that. The same should continue to apply to states' own districts for legislative, county and municipal offices. Our low-participation election system, governed almost exclusively by winner-take-all rules in single-member districts, is inconsistent with our own history and inadequate to the recognized diversity of our citizenship.

A system reformed this way--voting made easy, electoral competition made fair, states encouraged to insure full representation, and results on these terms known and regularly evaluated--would be more appropriate to a democratic America. We should not miss this chance to try again to get it.