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Let's Clean up Elections First

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So what should one do with a state that's fallen on bad times; is looking a little the worse for wear, increasingly erratic in its behavior, sometimes plain embarrassing in public, and in general just obviously not as happy and productive as it once was? Well, the first thing you should do - this not unlike the usual advice to drug or alcohol abusers - is get it to admit that it's got a problem, and that it needs some help!

So, beloved Wisconsin, do you admit that you've got a democracy problem? Do you think that your elections are too driven by money? That the exchanges between your governor and Legislature are getting sort of ridiculous? That the legislative process is a shadow of its former self, with less vigorous and sincere public debate and integrity? That you've actually been hiding more and more from the public, which is just now getting wind of the problems you've gotten yourself into? And do you admit that something has to change in your behavior, that the way you're going is just unacceptable? And finally, that you need some help to get out of this mess, and clean up your sorry act?

Yes? Well, that's good. Don't you feel better already? So let's get to work here.

Now when you're down and out, whom can you really turn to for help? Who's there for you, even when you're not for them? Your family, of course.

In your case, being a state, the people you should turn to are your citizens. They're the ones who really know your faults, and still love you. They're the ones who want to make sure you get well. Not the big shots and special interest types - the tassel-loafer guys with big checkbooks, or the hard-eyed gals who want to show they can be as ruthless as the next man. No, the people who live here, work here, are trying to raise families here and take care of their own parents. Your adult citizens.

This is a group we really haven't heard from in a while, but they are the ones with the biggest collective stake in cleaning up government. And I believe that they are people who would look kindly on any politician with the guts to start that process, because they respect courage and straight dealing. The people who were born here, or came here because they loved the place (like me), and plan on staying here for the same reason. That's the real strength in this state, and always has been. The people committed to it.

Basically what needs to be done to repair our government right now is to be honest with these people, and let their voices be more clearly heard in our government process, while also getting better information to them. Here's how to do that, starting with our elections.

Campaign finance reform

A good first step is reforming the crazy way we pay for our government, which is through rich people and special interests. These folks have a big personal stake in what government does, want to get favors from government, want to have special access to its internal workings, and therefore make big campaign contributions. They're not all bad people. They're just gaming the system that encourages this behavior. But the behavior itself is an insult to democracy. The idea includes the notion that all citizens should be on more or less equal footing in determining what government does. These people are elevating themselves above others, and making themselves "more equal" than others.

Now some private campaign contributions are indeed harmless, but a system entirely dependent on them is going to be riven by inequality. And economic inequality shouldn't so easily translate to political inequality. So you want to get some public money into this system, in ways that ensure that inequalities in private money don't frame the political debate.

Senate Bill 104, which our Legislature declined to pass this session, nicely accomplishes these results. It calls for 45 percent public financing on qualified candidacies, and also matches extraordinary spending by multimillionaires on their own campaign. The amount of public financing is sufficient to let a candidate run a real race, as opposed to now, where the amount is so low that nobody takes public money. It conditions the public money on the candidate not taking political action committee or conduit money, further cleaning up our act.

It increases reporting requirements for independent expenditures and, for the first time, imposes the public's right to know on phony issue ads, so that we can find out who's trying to fool us. And the public match for millionaire opponents also applies to independent expenditures and issue ads against a candidate, closing an important loophole. It's a remarkably good, thoughtful bill, and passing it would mean - in one fell swoop, with minimal public expense, and enormous savings long-term from more responsible budgeting - much cleaner and more democratic elections in this state. The next governor should call on the Legislature to pass SB 104 immediately, making it law for the 2004 elections.

That would be a first step along the new democracy recovery.

More next week. This is the third in a series of articles on reforming government and the election process in Wisconsin.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. COWS is sponsoring "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin.

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