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## Steps to Regain State's Democracy

By: Joel Rogers

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Over the past couple of weeks I've been arguing that the next governor - and until then, any candidate for that office - should make democratic reform a centerpiece of the next Wisconsin government.

Right after inauguration, in fact, he or she should call a special session of the Legislature just to consider this topic, and there present a package of democracy reforms - "Millennial Democracy," "Badger Democracy," "Cheesehead Democracy," "Whatever Democracy" - designed to clean up and invigorate our increasingly corrupt and decrepit election system.

A natural centerpiece of that package is what we considered last week: campaign finance reform. We should enact the Ellis bill (SB 104), which this session's Legislature failed to act on, and which Gov. Scott McCallum promised to kill if they did. Actually what McCallum said, with the loopy insincerity that has become his hallmark, is that he'd consider any campaign finance reform so long as it didn't include public money for campaigns. This would be like Colin Powell saying the United States would consider any solution to the Mideast crisis so long as it didn't ensure either Israelis or Palestinians a right to exist.

Thank goodness our governor isn't secretary of state. But whatever McCallum thinks, or fails to think, on the subject of campaign finance reform, the happy fact is that SB 104 is a very good bill. It gets some clean public money into the election process to make it possible for everyone to run for office, while preserving a substantial role for private contributions. It curbs independent expenditures and misleading issue advocacy. And it neuters excess spending by the multimillionaires who otherwise threaten to overtake our process.

Do those three things and you have a cleaner system. SB 104 should be passed.

But what else is needed? Much, actually, but for starters let's keep it simple. Here are two other basic election reforms, and one invitation to further thought, that could nicely round out the package.

Nonpartisan redistricting. Clean elections are still worth little if there is no competition in them. But our decennial process of redistricting does very little to ensure that. Indeed, as everyone knows, it is mostly designed to do the opposite - to carve up the electoral map in ways that maximize the number of noncompetitive districts. This is one reason why incumbency rates in Wisconsin elections are already well in excess of 90 percent.

Close to half our elections, in fact, aren't even contested. Why bother running for office if the incumbent has all the money (this will be improved by the reform in campaign finance) and is sitting in a "safe" district?

This unhealthy state of affairs owes directly to those who carve up our election districts in the first place: the two major parties, which have an obvious stake in preserving safe seats. The only solution is to take this game away from them.

Iowa provides a good example. A nonpartisan legislative support agency, the Legislative Services Bureau, and a small Temporary Redistricting Advisory Commission drive redistricting there.

The Legislative Services Bureau first draws the maps based upon fairly specific constitutional and statutory guidelines aimed at maximizing fairness and representativeness. The advisory commission then conducts a series of public hearings on the plan and recommends it to the Iowa Legislature. First time around, the Legislature is confined to fast track rules. Debate and "yea" and "nay" are all accepted, but no amendments.

If the plan fails, the bureau offers another, taking into account the reasons the Legislature offered for turning the first one down. Another fast-track vote. If it fails this second time, the bureau produces a third plan, again considering the opposition's reasons. This one is treated like an ordinary bill and is subject to amendment, although things seldom go that far.

This simple reform has had the effect of focusing public attention on the redistricting process, getting clarity on objections to different plans, and generally stamping out the corrupting deals ("I'll trade you three safe districts for my party in the Assembly against two for your party in the Senate") that distinguish the Wisconsin process. We should adopt it.

A strengthened Elections Board. No matter how good the rules are, though, they won't work if not enforced, and our state Elections Board - in charge of monitoring and enforcing our election law - doesn't seem up to this basic task.

It is effectively paralyzed by partisanship and is now missing enforcement opportunities and obligations. Especially with campaign finance reform, it needs to get cleaned up fast. As with redistricting, a large part of the problem stems from who is now in charge of the board, namely, the very political parties and legislative leaders it is supposed police. We should make the board strictly nonpartisan, and vest appointment power in some more neutral body, perhaps the state Supreme Court or its chief justice.

Proportional representation. So now we have reasonably clean elections, in reasonably fairly drawn districts, with reasonably vigorous and impartial enforcement of the law applying to both. That's enough work for one day, and perhaps the governor should just stop there.

But another sort of reform might also be considered. Now being enacted by different municipalities (see the recent referendum in San Francisco) and considered in different states, this aims at making voting itself more representative in its results.

Almost all elections in Wisconsin are decided by "winner take all" rules in single-member districts. But this is a very outmoded way of counting voter preferences, and risks serious under-reporting of electoral minorities. If all Senate districts voted 50 percent Republican, 45 Democratic, and 5 percent Green, for example, the Senate would be all Republican, even though only half the electorate was.

All over the world, and increasingly in the United States, people are moving to different forms of proportional representation in voting - in essence, efforts to get the real distribution of voter sentiment better matched by the distribution of government power. We should start think about doing this in Wisconsin. A natural first place to do this would be in those new sorts of proposed government - for example, regional planning commissions - that are explicitly charged with reconciling interests in very diverse constituencies.

Wisconsin used to be the envy of the world in the quality and cleanliness of its government. It's time to reclaim that greatness, moving with the same confidence and values that first achieved that, starting with our election system.

Simply put, we should be about making voting as easy and clear in its effects as possible. Fair competition, real choices, and real enforcement of the rules will be enough to get us real results.

We seek not a perfect government but a democratic one - something that any school child can recognize as about the people's will.

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. Go to [www.sustainingwisconsin.org](http://www.sustainingwisconsin.org) for more information. This is the fourth and last in a series of articles on election reform in Wisconsin.

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