

What Democracy Could Look Like

The Pro-Democracy Convention gives activists guidelines for improving – and preserving – our democracy.

by Samantha Adams

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its subsequent amendments took concrete steps toward ending discrimination in the electoral process and preventing states and governmental entities with bad track records from devising new ways to discriminate in the future. But problems still exist – a fact made glaringly obvious during the 2000 presidential election.

Before the Florida recount ended with the infamous 5-4 Supreme Court decision, a cross-section of leading progressive activists was already brainstorming possible electoral reforms. In early January this new coalition, the Pro-Democracy Campaign, drafted a comprehensive list of initiatives now known as the Voter's Bill of Rights.

During Pro-Democracy Week – a series of teach-ins, demonstrations and workshops that coincided with Martin Luther King Jr. birthday celebrations – the Campaign made plans for two summer events that would give new and experienced activists the opportunity to learn and talk about the Voter's Bill of Rights. In one short month, 75 organizations signed on as endorsers of these reforms, and a new electoral movement had begun.

A Season of Democratic Activity

The first piece of the Campaign's two-part summer action plan engaged young people in the movement at the week-long Democracy Summer Institute at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee. Sessions like "Who Doesn't Make it to the Polls?" and "The Cost of an Expensive Democracy" gave the 150 participants a crash course in the electoral process; speeches, interactive role-playing and community building reinforced their learning.

"You should have seen their faces light up when they realized what we were talking about," says Stephanie Wilson. Wilson is the executive director of the Fannie Lou Hamer Project, an organization working to redefine campaign finance as a civil rights issue, and con-

nect historic voting and civil rights struggles with the ongoing struggle for human rights. "At first these kids needed background in government and how it works. But once they had the nuts and bolts of civic participation in their heads they became engaged. They understood that money is the newest barrier to an equal and meaningful vote, and they went home eager to share what they learned."

With a new understanding of voting rights history and concrete organizational skills under their belts, participants plugged into campaigns organized around specific issues within the Voter's Bill of Rights. Their efforts are laying the groundwork and building the knowledge base for a larger Democracy Summer 2002 that will educate and mobilize millions of unregistered voters in time for mid-year elections.

Momentum Builds Toward Pro-Democracy Convention

On the heels of Democracy Summer, the Pro Democracy Convention and Training Institute brought presenters and more than 700 participants to Philadelphia for idea sharing, coalition building and action taking – all centered around the Voter's Bill of Rights. Ron Daniels, the executive director of the Center for Constitutional Rights, believes his organization's long-standing interest in and commitment to voting rights and the enfranchisement of Blacks and other minorities made it a natural sponsor for the event.

"We saw this as a chance to unite forces that hadn't worked together before and help them find common ground. The Center is not leading the agenda on any of the initiatives in the Voter's Bill of Rights, but we do feel like we've moved the process of electoral reform forward," Daniels says.

Training Institute Incubates In-depth Discussions

Finding the right balance between giving participants enough information and ensuring affordable lengths of stay proved tricky. To accommodate both those

seeking comprehensive information and others interested in one particular issue, the Center decided to host the Training Institute and the Convention back to back.

“If you could only come for one day, Saturday’s opening plenary, three workshops, caucuses and evening plenary gave you a well-rounded experience,” Daniels says. “If you were looking for a more intimate or in-depth experience – maybe one with fewer people and greater opportunities to interface with presenters – the Institute-Convention combination was a great option.”

The Institute kicked off at Temple University’s Tuttleman Learning Center. After a welcoming orientation and overview by Daniels followed by a preview of the forthcoming documentary film “Counting on Democracy,” more than 40 participants took part in sessions on correcting voter disenfranchisement, instant runoff voting and proportional representation. By the end of the day, participants from California were abreast of the latest electoral reforms in Florida, and progressives had good ideas for selling the idea of instant runoff voting to their conservative districts back home.

“The participants and the newcomers stayed and listened and talked from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. on the first day of the Institute;” says participant Lora Saltis. “No one wanted to be the first one to leave. I, for one, would have stayed all night. To finally let down my guard, to speak my mind freely, to relax in the midst of a welcoming and supportive group of like-minded people, was a joy, a rare joy.”

The Friday Institute focused on election finance reform, coalition building and community organizing. Stephanie Wilson passed out constituent letters with varying mock campaign contributions to illustrate the power of high-dollar donations in the current system. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams, a 1960s civil rights activist whose struggles alongside Fannie Lou Hamer helped enfranchise African American voters in Mississippi, shared her hard-earned lessons about what it will take to make the current electoral system fair.

“Change is raggedy and messy. And if you want change you have to be prepared for the chaos, ” Adams says. But rather than avoid upheaval, Adams urged participants to prepare for it with organization, education and empowerment. “At first people thought those of us traveling across Mississippi were bad,”

Adams says, “so we started a citizen education program. Once people knew what rights they had as citizens, they became more involved and less fearful of being associated with the Freedom Marchers.”

Voter’s Bill of Rights Challenges Status Quo

Just hours after the Friday Institute workshops wrapped up, the conference kicked off with a town hall meeting. The warm glow of the Institute’s friendship circle send-off gave way to excitement and anticipation as panelists filtered out of the pre-meeting press conference and mingled among the growing crowd. Slowly everyone made their way to the auditorium where panelists gathered on stage beneath a huge Pro-Democracy Convention banner.

After outlining the format for the evening, Daniels took a moment to explain that the Rev. Jesse Jackson, a panelist for the evening, was at that moment flying to meet his wife, Jacqueline Jackson. She had just been released after spending 10 days in jail for protesting on Vieques Island. The crowd applauded both Jackson and his wife, and enthusiasm remained high as panelists addressed the myriad electoral reform issues that brought them to the Convention.

Philadelphian Cheri Honkala of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union gave the most impassioned speech of the evening, calling for backbones for Congressional Democrats. She and other panelists fielded audience questions about Florida, election problems and the prospects for campaign finance reform – all topics slated for Saturday workshops. As Daniels wrapped up the evening, he congratulated everyone present for their willingness to put their frustrations aside and work toward reform. “We are in the right place at the right time,” Daniels said. And no one disagreed.

Saturday’s opening plenary presenters included educators and feminists, activists and authors, all of whom offered historical perspective on voting in America. The subsequent workshops, with their emphasis on the principles of the Voter’s Bill of Rights, offered a glimpse at what the future might hold. For Daniels, the collaboration among the various organizations conducting the workshops was inspiring.

“The highlight was the workshops. The exchanges were informative and exhilarating for people who had never heard about ideas like proportional representation and instant runoff voting, and even though peo-

ple saw the presenters as experts, they didn't feel like they were being talked down to. I could tell when people were still hanging around in the hallways afterward to continue the discussion that the sessions were a success," Daniels says.

The Saturday evening plenary combined reports from the day's workshops with a rousing appearance by members of a Detroit coalition who are fighting the takeover of their elected school board with an appointed one. Their chants of Keep the Vote – No Take Over fired participants up to sing along with Victoria Jackson Gray Adams, who concluded the evening with songs from the Civil Rights movement and some penned for the new movement taking shape. "Music is the art of binding people together and setting a mood," Adams said during the Institute. The revival-like feeling at the close of Saturday's events made her words ring true.

Empowering Participants to Shape the Future

"We are the leaders we've been looking for." Daniels observation during the Sunday morning plenary, which closed the Convention on a positive, if challenging, note. As he had repeatedly said throughout the four-day event, the Center for Constitutional Democracy brought participants and panelists together to build relationships and start conversations – now it was time for the real work to begin. From his observations at the Convention, Daniels had no doubt that those present were up to the task.

"People may have initially hesitated to support an initiative such as the Voter's Bill of Rights," Daniels says. "But once they learned that the Convention provided an opportunity to explain their agenda and take into account those of others, I believe they took the first incremental steps toward change."

Ideas are already on the table for mini versions of the Institute and Convention that could travel around the country to educate people about current electoral system flaws and the possibilities for reform.

Democracy Summer 2002 is also in the works. Stephanie Wilson has high hopes that the young people who attended this year's event will come back next year ready to make a real difference in mid-year elections. "We challenged them to use their energy, resources and passion for equality to work toward bringing common people back in to the process," Wilson says. And as Victoria Jackson Gray Adams will tell you, once people know their rights, they become more willing to demand their place in the process.

The Convention had barely ended when House Republicans dashed hopes for electoral reform by playing procedural games with the Shays-Meehan Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act. But the issue is far from dead. In a country where big-money interests have molded elections for too long, the Pro-Democracy Campaign – now 118 endorsers strong – is the shape of things to come.

S I D E B A R

The Voter's Bill of Rights

10 principles that could change voting in America for the better

Strict Enforcement and Extension of the Voting Rights Act

Florida was not the only state in which people of color experienced intimidation and disenfranchisement. The federal Justice Department must investigate and prosecute violations of the law wherever they occur, and the Voting Rights Act – including provisions that are set to expire in 2007 – should be extended.

Abolition of the Electoral College

The president should be elected by direct popular vote. If no candidate receives 51 percent of the vote, a runoff should be held. Instant Runoff Voting would allow for this contingency without a second election and would prevent the "spoiler" effect that occurs when a like-minded majority is divided between two candidates allowing a less popular candidate to win.

Clean Money Elections

A ban on soft-money contributions and the establishment of full public financing of public campaigns and public information services should be implemented. Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts and Arizona election laws should be expanded to other states and implemented at the federal level. Broadcasters should be required in their licenses to provide free time on public airwaves to all candidates and parties.

Instant Runoff Voting

When voters know their votes really counts, they are more likely to cast a ballot. Instant Runoff Voting allows voters to rank their candidates in order of preference, beginning with first choice, second choice and so on. If no candidate receives a majority of first choices, a runoff count can combine second and third choices until one candidate has a majority. Instant

runoff voting saves money by eliminating primaries; it also promotes positive campaigning and coalitions since winners may depend on second choice votes for their wins.

Proportional Representation

Proportional representation eliminates winner-take-all elections and replaces them with a system in which cultural, racial and political minorities have a voice too. If one quarter of voters support a party, they should be able to elect one quarter of the seats. Democracies around the world practice this form of representation, which improves voter turnout and increases representation by women.

Voting Rights for Former Prisoners

Ex-felons who have paid their debt should not only be able to vote, they should be encouraged to participate in the process. Laws that prohibit ex-felons from voting affect more than four million Americans, a disproportionate number of whom are African American, and they should be repealed.

Easier and More Reliable Voting Systems

Fewer hurdles. Less restrictions. Immediate registration. Student registration in the locality where they attend school. Eliminating needless hurdles like these would improve voter turnout. And once people make it to the polls, they should be greeted by trained, pro-

fessional supervisors, reliable voting machines, translation services, access for the disabled and polls that stay open until everyone has voted.

Easier Access for All Electoral Candidates

When alternative voices are not heard, voters who prefer neither of the two main candidates are unlikely to participate. Barriers that prevent third and fourth parties from participating in debates and getting their names on the ballot should be eliminated. And since the airwaves belong to the public, all candidates should receive free air time.

Independent and Non-Partisan Election Administration Bodies

During an election, partisan and even bipartisan control of electoral institutions can make even the simplest procedure seem politically motivated. America should emulate other countries, including Canada and Mexico, in instituting impartial, nonpartisan electoral bodies.

Statehood for the District of Columbia

The District of Columbia's population exceeds that of several states, yet it has no voice in the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives. There is not a single valid reason why D.C. citizens should have no congressional representation.