

The Pro-Democracy Wildfire in America's States

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A billion to run

April 6, 2007 -- As Washington and Wall Street elites happily try to choke the life out of democracy, states are fighting back on three fronts.

The ruling class in Washington and New York are likely clinking glasses this weekend in a grand celebration. This week, with the announcement that both parties' major candidates are vacuuming up corporate cash like never before, they treated America to the beginning of the first billion-dollar presidential campaign, and the final gruesome execution of that thing known as "democracy." The suites of K Street and Wall Street and the mansions of Georgetown and Northern Virginia are the gallows, with bundled, six-figure campaign contributions serving as the noose. Candidates of both parties step right up, slip their heads through the loop and happily grin as the floor drops out from underneath them, snapping whatever spine they had - all while the crowd of big donors and political reporters cheers like beserk baseball fans in Yankee Stadium's right-field bleachers. The deranged mobs at Paris's blood-soaked guillotine during the French Revolution have nothing on America's anti-democratic political elites today.

But out in the heartland - the place where too many Beltway-focused activists, donors, pundits and strategists too often ignore - something of a revolt is going on. Beyond the view of Washington newspaper bureaus, Capitol Hill offices and Dupont Circle wine and cheese fundraisers, states are waging their own multi-pronged pro-democracy fight - and with increasing success.

On the most basic expression of democracy - access to the vote - Iowa just became the 8th state to legalize Election Day Registration. And thanks to the coalition of legislators and advocacy groups like Demos and the Progressive States Network, the other states are aggressively moving in the same direction. In all, 74 percent of eligible voters participated in states with election day registration, compared to only 60% in non-EDR states.

On another very basic issue - the concept of "one person, one vote" - states are moving forward with major reforms. Specifically, Maryland and Hawaii took key steps toward creating a national popular vote for president - a system that would scrap the anti-democratic electoral college that essentially writes entire states out of presidential elections. Under the proposal being pushed by National Popular Vote, Fair Vote and the Progressive States Network, states' electoral votes would automatically be awarded to the winner of the national popular vote regardless of the state's individual vote. The system, which would create a national popular election, would take effect only if states representing a majority of the nation's 538 electoral votes approved such legislation. Big surprise - Beltway elites are against the idea, with the dean of the Washington press corps, David Broder, actually writing that the electoral college's anti-democratic fundamentals are a "formula for healthy politics." Such hysterical, substance-free arguments are yet more proof that states' bold moves are frightening the entrenched special interests in Washington that enjoy owning America's political process.

Finally, various states such as Washington, New Mexico, New Jersey and others are moving forward with plans to publicly finance elections - the ultimate pro-democracy step in giving candidates a way

to run for office without having to shakedown special interests for cash. Earlier this year, I was in Seattle for a speech on public financing in my role as co-chair of the Progressive States Network, and I can tell you that this is an issue that an increasing segment of the population understands - and, as polls confirm, is ready to get behind.

The cable chat shows and radio talk fests will no doubt continue being dominated by Beltway pundits hyperventilating over the presidential money sweepstakes. As we've seen, these people hate democracy, because they understand it is a threat to their relevance and status. But as long as citizens can resist the urge to focus all of their political attention on Washington politics and actually expend some of their energy changing their own states and communities, we are going to start seeing more and more pro-democracy successes throughout America.

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