

VOTER BILL OF RIGHTS

From unreliable electronic voting machines and millions of uncounted ballots, to partisan election officials and 10-hour waits at the polls, it is clear that our electoral system is in dire need of an overhaul. To build a more just, secure and robust democracy, we support the following 12-point Voter Bill of Rights:

1. Guarantee a Voter-Verified Paper Ballot for All Voting Machines

Every voting machine in the United States must be equipped to produce a voter-verified paper ballot as well as an electronic record of every vote cast. In the event of any discrepancy or recount, paper ballots must take precedence over machine counts, and there must be a Mandatory Manual Random Audit of a certain percentage of precincts in every election. Electronic voting machines must incorporate "open source" coding tested by an independent agency before and during the election to guarantee a transparent and fair process. A national standard for certification of voting machines and software should be implemented to insure that by 2008, every vote cast in federal elections is cast using equal voting technology. Consider the use of traditional hand-marked and hand-counted paper ballots, which are known to have the lowest spoilage rate and highest accuracy, especially for Federal offices.

2. Replace Partisan Oversight with Non-Partisan Election Commissions

It is time to overhaul our federal, state, and local election agencies to guarantee fair elections. We must replace the current system of partisan election administration, in which partisan secretaries of state, county clerks, election commissioners, and other partisan officials are able to issue rulings that favor their own political parties and themselves, with a non-partisan, independent system of running elections. No election official should ever simultaneously also be a candidate's campaign manager or worker. We must also insure that independent international and domestic election observers are given full access to monitor our elections.

3. Celebrate Democracy: Make Election Day a National Holiday

Working people should not be forced to choose between exercising their right to vote and getting to work on time. While the laws of 30 states guarantee the right to take time off from work to vote, many workers and employers are unaware of these laws. Holding national elections on a national holiday will greatly increase the number of available poll workers and polling places and increase overall turnout, while making it much easier for working Americans to go to the polls.

4) Make it Easier to Vote

Many citizens are discouraged from voting by unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles and restrictions. We must simplify and rationalize voter registration so that no one is again disenfranchised for failing to check a superfluous box, as occurred this year in Florida, or for not using heavy enough paper, as nearly occurred in Ohio. To ensure that all qualified voters are able to vote, we must follow the lead of states like Minnesota and Wisconsin by replacing restrictive voter residency requirements with same-day voter registration, allowing qualified voters to register at the polls on Election Day itself. (continued on next page)

4. Make it Easier to Vote (continued) Our current system forces millions of voters to wait up to ten hours to vote. This is unacceptable, and it disenfranchises those who cannot afford to wait. To increase access to the polls, all states must provide sufficient funding for enough early voting and election-day polling places to guarantee smooth and speedy voting. To ensure equal access and minimize the wait at the polls, election authorities must allocate resources based upon the number of potential voters per precinct. We must put an end to the government-backed practice of allowing partisan activists to challenge the voting rights of individual voters at the polls.

5. Count Every Vote!

Voters must know that their vote will count. Every recent presidential election has been marred by the discounting millions of spoiled, under-vote, over-vote, provisional and absentee ballots. This discounting of votes has disproportionately impacted people of color, especially African American, and is a fundamental voting rights and racial justice problem. Officials must ensure that every voting precinct and ward is adequately staffed with sufficiently trained personnel and professional supervision; that unreliable voting machines are replaced; that absentee ballots are mailed with a sufficient time for delivery; and that provisional ballots count for state and federal contests regardless of where the vote is cast.

6. Re-Enfranchise Ex-Felons

The permanent disenfranchisement of former felons, a practice that falls outside of international or even U.S. norms, is an unreasonable and dangerous penalty that weakens our democracy by creating a subclass of four million excluded American citizens. Because the criminal justice system disproportionately penalizes African American males, this disenfranchisement is racist in its impact and is constitutionally suspect. Those states that permanently disenfranchise felons (Florida, Virginia, Nebraska, Mississippi, Kentucky, Iowa, Arizona, and Alabama) must amend their laws and practices to restore full citizenship to ex-offenders.

7. Implement Instant Runoff Voting (IRV)

We must replace our current "first-past-the-post" system with Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), which insures that the will of the true majority, not a mere plurality, produces the winner of each election. IRV allows voters to rank order the candidates in order of their preference (first, second, third choice). If a candidate wins a majority of first choice votes, they are the winner. If no candidate gets a majority of first choices, the lowest vote-getting candidate is eliminated, and the second-choice votes of those voters who backed the eliminated candidate are reallocated to the remaining contenders. Counting continues until one candidate has received a majority. In this way, a runoff count can be conducted without the need for runoff election. IRV gives voters the opportunity to vote for those candidates they like the most without worrying that their vote will help candidates they like least. Instant Runoff voting has long been used successfully around the world, from Ireland, to Australia, to, most recently, San Francisco.

8. Proportional Representation

The right of representation belongs to all citizens. Our winner-take-all elections award representation to the largest factions and leave everyone else, often the majority, unrepresented. The winner-take-all system unnecessarily restricts choice, polarizes politics and limits political discourse. We must adopt proportional representation for legislative elections to ensure the fair representation of all voters. Millions of Democrats in Republican areas and Republicans in Democratic areas are unrepresented in our system, and the majority of Greens, Libertarians, and other independents are unrepresented at all levels of government. Our system should provide fair representation to all voters, in proportion to their numbers.

9. Replace Big Money Control With Public Financing and Equal Air-Time

In a system where the amount of money a candidate spends is directly related to their likelihood of winning, it is not surprising that voters think politicians are more concerned with big campaign contributors than with individual voters. We must follow Maine's lead by establishing a nationwide system of "Clean Money" full public financing for all ballot-qualified candidates. We must require the broadcasting corporations that license our public airwaves to provide airtime for debates, and free time for all ballot-qualified candidates and parties.

10. Guarantee Equal Access to the Ballot and Debates

In our current electoral system, independent parties such as the Greens and Libertarians face a host of barriers designed to limit voter choice and voice. Ballot access laws and debates specifically designed to exclude independent party candidates discourage voting and undermine the legitimacy of our elections. In most cases, the established parties have never themselves met the signature requirements they impose on independent parties. We must eliminate prohibitive ballot access requirements, and replace the partisan Commission on Presidential Debates with a non-partisan Citizens Debate Commission.

11. Abolish the Electoral College

It is time to end the safe state/battleground state dichotomy and make all votes equal, no matter the state of the voter. We must amend the Federal Constitution to replace election of the President by the Electoral College with direct election by the voters. At the same time, for so long as the Electoral College persists, we must amend our state laws and constitutions to allocate each state's electors proportionately to the popular vote.

12. Establish a Constitutional Right To Vote

We must amend our Federal Constitution to confirm the right to vote for every American, as advocated by Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. A Nation can only be called a true Democracy when it uniformly guarantees the right to vote to every one of its citizens.