

# GREENPRINT FOR DEMOCRACY:

## The Green Party's Strategy for Electoral Reform

*By Daniel Solnit*

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“Without democracy, there is no justice.” -Ralph Nader

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At the root of most problems, both local and global, is the concentration of wealth and power in too few hands. In order to reign in excessive corporate power, we first need to regain control of our government and other public institutions, which have been taken over by corporate interests. To do that, we must achieve three crucial reforms: proportional representation voting systems (including instant runoff voting), public financing of elections, and equal media access. To accomplish these changes, we are building a strong, grassroots alternative to the corporate two-party duopoly, a third party that represents the interests of the vast majority of working people in the US. We can win on the many other issues we face, once we restore electoral democracy and end corporate domination of our government. Here is an outline of the reforms we seek.

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### Instant Runoff Voting: The solution to "the lesser of two evils"

Some progressives are facing a dilemma, one which returns every election season: should I vote my conscience, supporting the candidate who really represents my values? Or should I hold my nose and vote for someone who is clearly not what I want, but is marginally better (or at least less awful) than the other major party candidate?

The fact that we must even ask this question indicates something terribly wrong with our election system. When we are forced to choose between the lesser of two evils, we are dealing not with democracy, but with a sort of electoral extortion. This results in a political disengagement among the majority of eligible voters, who choose to sit out the elections rather than take part in what is widely seen as a sham, a pretense of competition between two wings of the same corporate party. Even those of us who persist in voting feel increasingly dismayed, disgusted, and disempowered.

The most tragic aspect is the diminished expectations; many of us have so thoroughly accepted the 'evil of two lesser' that we actively campaign for the (presumed) lesser evil. Convinced we cannot win meaningful peace, social justice, human needs, or environmental protection from the electoral process, we settle for damage control, hoping that one party will do slightly less harm than the other. We have surrendered our power and our inherent right to democratic self-governance over to corporate big-money interests, and we act as if this were normal or acceptable. It is not, and it's time we stopped putting up with this hijack of our democracy.

This dilemma arises from a two-party monopoly, institutionalized in everything from unreasonable ballot access laws and systematic media bias to a presidential debate commission run by the former chairs of the Democratic and Republican national committees (and illegally funded by major corporations). Couple this 'duopoly' with the increasing domination of both major parties by corporate interests, and their resulting

rightward slide, and progressives are left with few if any major party candidates worthy of our votes, and alternative candidates who usually stand little or no chance of being elected.

Some blame the voting public for opting out, or the media for reducing elections to the level of sports coverage, or even the third parties for 'spoiling' races by offering voters a meaningful choice. However, the problem is the voting system itself - it's just plain undemocratic. Our 'winner-take-all' system may have been state of the art two centuries ago, but it is now as obsolete as the quill pen.

There is a better way, one which is fairer, more democratic, and more representative of the majority of voters. It's called Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), sometimes known as preference voting, and it's already in use in many parts of the world. It's even used in the US in some local elections, as well to select Academy Awards 'Oscar' winners.

Here's how it works: you rank the candidates according to your preference, 1-2-3. If your first choice does not get enough votes to stay in the race, she is eliminated and your vote automatically transfers to your second choice, and so on, until one candidate receives over 50%. That's it - it's really that easy. In fact, it's used by elementary school children for class elections. (Critics who say it's too complicated for the public obviously believe we cannot count to three.)

The implications, however, are huge. No more voting for the lesser of two evils - with IRV you really can vote for the best candidate. No more 'spoilers' - if your first choice doesn't win, you help elect your second choice, not your last choice. And IRV means much less negative campaigning: attack ads hurt not only the target but also the attacker, thereby helping third candidates. This year many progressives who clearly prefer Green Party candidate Ralph Nader may feel compelled to vote

for Al Gore out of fear of 'helping' to elect George W. Bush. Many others are convinced that Gore is only marginally less awful than Bush, and that at some point we have to draw the line and vote our values and our conscience, will vote for Nader regardless of the consequences. We shouldn't have to make this choice, and we wouldn't if IRV were used in this election.

A few years ago in a New Mexico congressional race, Green Party candidate Carol Miller challenged two unappealing major party candidates. This was considered a 'safe' seat, held by Democrats for over 40 years. However, Miller got 17% of the vote, the Democrat got 40%, and the Republican was elected with just 43%. This result did not reflect the real preferences of the majority of the voters; it's a safe guess that a most of Miller's supporters would have ranked the Democrat second under an IRV system, thus electing him once Miller was eliminated.

The same thing could happen in California. Suppose Nader got 17%, Gore 40%, and Bush 43% - Bush would win 100% of the state's Electoral College votes, even though he got far less than a majority. Now imagine the same vote with IRV: if a majority of Nader supporters rank Gore second, Gore pulls ahead of Bush and wins the state. (By the way, Greens also support abolishing the Electoral College.)

Because IRV allows real choice, it increases voter turnout. Because IRV encourages people to vote their real preferences, it more accurately reflects the views of all the voters. And because it removes the fear of electing the worst, it encourages people to vote for the best. With IRV, it is conceivable that, if the many millions of voters who really prefer Nader actually ranked him first choice, Nader could win. Even when alternative candidates don't win, the larger percentage of first choice votes they receive would act as a counter-pressure to the rightward drift in both major parties, and would force major party candidates to address real issues and consider adopting progressive positions.

US courts have upheld IRV systems as constitutional. IRV can be adopted by the voters for local and state elections such as mayor or governor. Congress could use IRV in the presidential election without amending the constitution.

As a first step in moving the US toward IRV, the Green Party is educating the public (through speakers, videos, and presentations to groups and organizations) and urging the adoption of IRV (and other proportional voting systems) for elections in schools and colleges, and in membership organizations such as the Sierra Club.

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## Proportional Representation: making every vote count

While IRV works for electing one person (president, mayor, etc), proportional representation (PR) is a system for electing groups of representatives, from city councils to congress. PR represents all political parties or viewpoints, not just the majority one, in proportion to the percentage of votes each receives. For example, if the Green Party received 10% of the votes, Green candidates would fill 10% of the seats. Under PR, representatives are elected at-large, or from multi-seat districts, rather than in single-seat, winner-take-all districts. PR assures that each political party or candidate will receive the percent of legislative seats that reflects their public support. A party or candidate need not come in first to win seats.

PR voting systems are used by almost all of the world's established democracies. In April 1994 South Africa decided to use PR rather than "winner take all" to form a multi-racial democracy. In 1993 New Zealand, Japan, Russia and Mexico adopted a form of PR. Significantly, all of the former Communist countries, including Russia, have chosen to model their emerging democracies on proportional representation, not the "winner-take-all" model. In their first elections, Scotland and Wales chose proportional systems. All these countries have adopted some form of PR because they recognize the obvious: PR is a fairer, more flexible, more modern electoral system than the antiquated eighteenth century "winner-take-all" method.

By contrast, in the United States we still use "winner-take-all" single seat districts, where votes going to a

losing candidate are wasted, even if that candidate garners 49.9% of the vote. This leaves large groups of voters unrepresented. Voters sense this, and often do not vote for a candidate they like, but rather the one who stands the best chance of winning -- the "lesser of two evils" -- or don't bother to vote at all. No wonder that, among the 21 democracies in Western Europe and North America, the United States is next to last in voter turn-out; only 36% of those eligible voted in the 1994 Congressional elections.

PR produces greater voter turnout (typically 70-90%) because there are more choices -- third, fourth, fifth parties -- and more diverse perspectives. PR also results in more women and minorities being elected: In Sweden, 40% of national officeholders are women; 39% in Norway, 33% in Finland and Denmark. In the U.S. women make up only 12%. PR leads to more diverse representation, cleaner campaigns run on the issues, not mud-slinging, and reduced effects of big money.

PR was used successfully in the U.S. in the 1920's in 24 cities such as New York City, Boulder, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Cambridge, MA (which still uses it). Both the majority and various political and racial minorities gained representation where their voices had previously been unheard. The minorities included Irish Catholics, Polish immigrants, African Americans and leftists. The dominant political forces were eventually successful in repealing PR nearly everywhere, usually by targeting unpopular minorities like blacks and leftists.

There are many versions of PR; the most widely used form is called the 'list' system. Each voter selects one party and its slate of candidates to represent them. If a party receives 30% of the vote, they receive 30% of the seats in the legislature; 10% receives 10% and so on. A minimum percentage of the votes is required to earn seats, typically 3-5%. This type of PR is ideal for large legislatures elected at state and national levels, and would assure Green representation in congress and the state legislature.

What about having a representative from my own district? Geographic representation is nice, but with "winner-take-all" there's a good chance you didn't vote for that representative. Under PR, you will have not one, but many representatives from a larger district, so there is a much greater likelihood that at least one of those reps will be someone you voted for. In South Africa's 1994 PR elections, 86% of eligible voters helped elect someone. Some countries like Germany use mixed systems, in which half the representatives are elected from districts, and half using PR.

Another form of PR is a multi-member district, in which voters in a single geographic district elect multiple representatives. For example, if your congressional district elected five reps instead of one, only 20% of the vote would be needed to select one of those reps. In many southern states, large black minorities went entirely unrepresented because white voters comprised a majority in each district. After the civil rights act, some districts were re-drawn along racial lines to allow blacks to elect representatives. Recent Supreme Court decisions have thrown out these racially based districts; multi-member districts offer an obvious solution to this situation, and to the problem of gerrymandering in general.

Gerrymandering is the practice of drawing district lines to favor one party or another. For example, the sixth congressional district (Lynn Woolsey) was drawn to be two-thirds Democrats, insuring that Republicans have no chance of being elected (much less Greens or others). To show just how bad gerrymandering has gotten, consider this: in a typical congressional election, half the eligible don't vote, and nearly 90% of those who do, live in a district so gerrymandered that the outcome is a foregone conclusion – their vote doesn't matter, since only one party's candidate can win. Of the remaining 5%, about half vote for a losing candidate, and so are unrepresented. This means that less than 3% of all eligible voters actually help elect someone to congress in a closely contested race

- hardly our idea of democracy. PR would make the ugly partisan mess of gerrymandered districts unnecessary.

What's Wrong with Only Two Parties? Two parties limit the voters' choices. U.S. citizens would never accept an economic system that allowed us to buy cars from only two companies, or to choose from only two airlines. Why then, should we have to settle for just two options in politics? It's no wonder such a large portion of the U.S. electorate decides not to participate: they're not buying what the two parties are selling!

The logjam and partisan bickering of U.S. politics is partly the result of the winner-take-all two-party system, where each party says "Everything my party does is right and everything your party does is wrong." The optimum campaign strategy is to sling mud at your opponent, driving their voters to your party. New ideas and solutions have a hard time percolating to the surface in such a bitter environment. But this dynamic is not so advantageous when there are three or more parties.

Winner-take-all elections are also more susceptible to the corruption of big money. A majority of votes is a lot of votes to win, and a candidate has to plaster her or his name and face over every billboard, bumper sticker and TV ad to win that many votes. Since so much is at stake -- you either win the seat or you lose -- there is an urgency to spend lavishly.

But with PR you don't have to come in first to win seats. Since PR actually reduces the percentage of votes it takes for a party or candidate to win a seat, candidates tend to run cleaner, more positive, issue-oriented campaigns, targeted at a particular constituency. Minor parties win representation in PR democracies even though they spend less money than the major parties.

So how do we change from "winner-take-all" to PR? In many states it's possible simply by changing election laws, either by the state legislatures or by a voter initiative. With a strong national movement for democratic elections, we could convert to PR systems for electing city councils, state legislatures, and even the U.S. House of Representatives. Changing the U.S. Senate to PR would require a constitutional amendment, but Senators could be elected by Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) with just a law change.

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## Other Solutions:

### **Initiative, Referendum, and Recall**

We have these grass-roots options in California, but many states do not. Initiatives are a wonderful tool for the people to bypass an unresponsive legislature; unfortunately, big money interests are abusing the initiative process. We favor requiring most or all initiative signature-gathering to be unpaid, in order to make it more difficult for wealthy interests to buy their way onto the

ballot, and strong limits on political ads used to deceive voters.

### **None of the Above (NOTA)**

A binding NOTA option in all elections; if NOTA wins, all the candidates are thrown out and a new election with new candidates is held in 30 days. The only way to vote

'no' in the current system is to stay home, which a majority of voters do with great consistency. NOTA could increase voter turnout. On the other hand, NOTA tends to encourage a reactive, "damn them all" attitude in voters, and does not offer a constructive way to elect better representatives. The second batch of candidates could be as bad as the first. Greens are divided on NOTA; many fear that it could be seen as a substitute for more constructive solutions such as PR and public financing.

### **Term Limits**

Actually, most Greens oppose term limits, because sending a bunch of inexperienced newcomers to Sacramento makes the lobbyists even more powerful. The current term limits have only produced a game of musical chairs, as senators run for assembly and vice versa. The problem is not length of time in office, but rather the corrupting influence of money.

### **Universal voter registration**

Voter registration requirements are often arcane or difficult, and vary widely from state to state. Research shows that voter turnout among those registered is significantly higher than reported in the media (because of duplicate and invalid records in the registration rolls.) Many more people would vote if registration were not such a significant barrier. We favor measures to encourage and simplify registration.

### **Extending voting rights to convicts and resident aliens**

Most prisoners in the US are denied the right to vote, regardless of their crime. Most states, including California, do not let released felons vote until they are off parole. Almost half the states deny parolees voting rights for life. Over one million African-Americans cannot vote because of current or prior convictions – the implications of this racial disenfranchisement are obvious.

Resident aliens – non-citizens who live legally, often permanently, in the US, pay taxes, and are subject to our laws – are also denied the right to vote. Didn't we have a little incident with King George a couple centuries ago over taxation without representation?

The Green Party has no official position on this, but my personal view is that both of these groups – each of which comprises many millions of Americans - are being denied a fundamental right, without which democracy is impossible. I suggest that anyone who establishes legal residency in the US for at least one year, and all convicts in prison or on parole, should be able to vote in all elections, with two exceptions: those convicted of election fraud, and public officials convicted of corruption or abuse of power in office.

### **Voting on weekends, voting by mail**

We are the only major country which holds elections on a workday. This is a holdover from 19<sup>th</sup> century attempts to prevent working people from voting. We favor making election day a paid holiday, as in many European countries.

### **Limit campaign season to 3 months**

Most European countries limit campaigns to 2 or 3 months, not the two years or more we see in the US. Many representatives with two-year terms never stop campaigning and fundraising.

### **Electronic Referendums**

Internet technology makes it possible for most people to participate directly in their governments decision-making process. Greens are looking to develop local prototypes for using electronic referendums. Under this system, most decisions would still be left to our elected representatives. However, each month the one or two most important issues before a local government (such as a city council) would be explained and debated on community access TV and websites, and every resident could vote by phone or internet. The results could be binding or merely advisory, but it would make clear to the council where the community stands on an issue.

### **Voluntary public financing**

Prop 208 and similar campaign finance reform measures cannot resolve the basic problem of private wealth controlling elections. Public Financing prevents private money – corporate, PACs, soft money, and personal fortunes – from buying elections. We support a voluntary tax check-off (which does not increase taxes) for publicly financing all elections, with a ban on all other funding. We also call for overturning the Supreme Court decision which equates money with speech.

### **Free & equal media access, no TV or radio advertising**

All ballot-qualified candidates should receive equal time for substantive discussion of issues. Paid political ads should be banned or severely limited. (See article below on corporate media.) Democracy rests on the *informed* consent of the governed; we cannot become informed when corporate interests flood our TV and radio airwaves with commercial garbage, and exclude alternative points of view from the public debate. We, the people, *own* those public airwaves, which media corporations exploit and profit from rent-free; it's time we took back control of our media, and promote free, fair debates on real, substantive issues by *all* ballot-qualified candidates, not just 'Republicrats'.

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For more info on IRV, Proportional Representation, and other voting reforms, contact the

**Center for Voting and Democracy:**  
[www.fairvote.org](http://www.fairvote.org) (415) 824-2735

**Green Party of Sonoma County:**  
[www.sonomagreenparty.org](http://www.sonomagreenparty.org) (707) 524-8818

*Recommended reading:*

[Fixing Elections](#) – Steven Hill

[Real Choices, New Voices](#) - Douglas Amy

[Tyranny of the Majority](#) - Lani Guinier

*A full bibliography is available from The Center for Voting and Democracy for \$1.*