

Stop Disenfranchising Voters

By David Chandler

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The Florida electoral controversy is raising questions afresh about the fairness of the electoral process. The Republican camp apparently sees nothing wrong with 20,000 disqualified votes in one county. After all, they say, the same thing happened four years ago! The Democrats are asking the courts to rectify the situation based on the anomalously high vote count for Pat Buchanan and the number of disqualified ballots. The ballot in Palm Beach is called illegal because its confusing layout has the effect of disenfranchising so many people. All the focus is on one state, because that state happens to be the final one in the count, but it would be wrong to assume Florida is the only place where people were disenfranchised by the voting system.

People are disenfranchised in much larger numbers by a much more fundamental flaw in the system: plurality voting. It can be shown mathematically that in a race among three or more candidates plurality voting, where everyone votes for one person and the one with the highest tally wins, can elect candidates who are the most despised by the majority of voters. A united minority can elect someone who is detested by the majority, if the majority is split on who their first-choice candidate should be. Plurality voting is fair and democratic only in a two-way race.

Should Ralph Nader have conceded to Gore and gotten out of the race? No. That is not a democratic alternative either. A new party needs to assert its own identity. The Greens are not just liberal Democrats. The message of the Greens was that both the Democrats and Republicans have been corrupted by the overwhelming influence of money from the major corporations. Gore did not have a claim on Nader's votes. Gore in fact split Nader's vote by whining in the end about the closeness of the race, to the detriment of the Green Party. Nader's support was above 5% and as high as 10%, in many states, primarily where the Bush-Gore decision was so lopsided that their votes would be unlikely to tip the election to Bush. However many Nader supporters elsewhere were blackmailed into voting for Gore as the lesser of two evils. This illustrates a fundamental flaw in plurality voting that works against the interests of democracy.

In this election disenfranchised voters can be redressed, not by seeking a new vote to a few counties in Florida, but by a nationwide two-way runoff vote between Bush and Gore. Such a vote would show that Gore is the choice of the American People, by both popular and electoral counting methods. Bush partisans would complain that the Nader voters would change their vote to Gore, but that is just the point. Neither the Gore

supporters nor the majority of the Nader supporters want Bush to be president. Bush is supported by a minority and abhorrent to the majority. Imposing him on the majority would be a travesty of democracy.

The solution to this problem in the long run is to institute Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), as proposed by the Center for Voting and Democracy (<http://www.fairvote.org>). Rather than selecting only one choice for president, each voter would rank the candidates. On the first round only the first-choice votes are counted. If any candidate has a majority the election is decided. If no candidate wins with a clear majority the candidate with the lowest count is dropped and the votes are recounted. In each round your vote goes to your most preferred surviving candidate. Nader supporters who prefer Gore over Bush could vote their conscience without fear of acting as a spoiler. Who can say how many Gore supporters (and even some Bush supporters) would have given their first-pick to Nader if they knew they would not be tipping the election to a less desirable outcome.