

ISSUES THAT MATTER FOR 2008 Adopt the National Initiative

In some cases, Congress, seeing that there is going to be a vote on this matter anyway, may actually get off the dime and seek to enact the law without even having to have a national vote.

If Congress doesn't act, however—or if it enacts an outrageous law that people want to reverse—then a sufficient petition drive will automatically bring about a national debate and a direct national vote by the people -- if the petition is successful.

This already happens in nearly half the states, and in several dozen countries for particular questions. The system is used to the greatest extent in Switzerland—which is widely respected for its excellence in democratic governance.

Switzerland has been praised as such by observers as diverse as Tocqueville, Bryce, and, in contemporary times, Ron Paul, Bill Bradley, and Ronald Reagan.

Switzerland is rightly termed, by Senator Mike Gravel, “the greatest democratic republic” in the history of the world.

What would this proposal do?

Several things.

First, it would break the national logjam on many issues that have never been resolved—some of them over decades—and which tend not to be resolved by the self-interested incumbents of both parties.

Furthermore, it would take significant power out of the hands of lobbyists, White House aides, network television executives, congressional committee chairmen, and other particular elites—and spread it over the American people.

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One way of viewing it is, there would be a new check and balance—and a spur—added to our three branches of government.

The National Initiative would give Americans the kind of effective choice and participation in decision-making that we enjoy in most spheres of our lives – purchasing our own food, renting a hotel room, bidding on Ebay—but not, paradoxically, in our own political system.

If you like Senator Obama's policy on the war, but Senator McCain's position on taxes, or you like Mr. Nader's healthcare plan but not some of his other proposals, you no longer have to choose to swallow one bitter pill or another.

You can elect the persons you believe have the highest character, and then support and oppose them on particular issues as they arise.

Flowing from this—from the fact that each American, as one writer has put it, would now “be, in some sense, a member of Congress”—we would see a revival and renaissance of citizenship and citizen activism not seen, sadly, in many decades.

Having power—having a check on their political elites—having a reason to be active and informed—Americans would be active and informed.

In general, when Americans are given choices and have the power to make decisions, they are highly responsible and informed.

“Freedom,” said the ancient Roman lawyer Cicero, “is participation in power.”

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Some people may fear that Americans are not wise enough to make such choices responsibly. Or that direct democracy will become a threat to minority rights—a fear aptly refuted by Alexander Keyssar of Harvard and Gregory Fossedal of the Tocqueville Institution, among others.

To this understandable hesitation, we need only ask: compared to what?

Compared to a Congress that votes on laws it hasn't even read, written by lobbyists, while bottling up others without even a vote, for decades?

Compared to a bipartisan White House-Congressional Empire that has now launched at least eight wars since World War II, without ever declaring one?

We may rather say, paraphrasing Winston Churchill, that a system of lawmaking by the people is likely to be the worst ever seen—except for all of the conceivable alternatives.

For more information, see:

On the Web: <http://www.nationalinitiative.us/>

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"The people can never willfully betray their own interests, but they may possibly be betrayed by the representatives of the people."

– The Federalist No. 63

Trust by Americans in nearly all institutions of power—with some temporary rallies now and then, to be sure, as after 9/11—has been in decline for nearly half a century.

Today Americans rate Congress, the Presidency, the courts, politics in general, the press, corporations, and both the Democratic and Republican Parties at levels lower than during most of Watergate.

In a political system choking on bipartisan corruption, in the midst of an incumbent-ocracy protection racket, there are only two stark alternatives:

We can trust the same parties and the same institutions to reform themselves, to bring change where they have promised it for decades, and not delivered.

Or we can take matters into our own hands, reform the system, and reclaim our rights to legislate. It is in our name, after all – “we the people”—that the powers of the constitution itself are delegated.

The way it works is pretty simple.

Whenever there's an issue people feel strongly about—health care, the war in Iraq, election laws—people can force a national vote on a proposal for change.

Sponsors – who could be any number of citizens—simply gather, under enabling procedures, enough signatures to show that the idea has some reasonable level of support, and the matter is placed on the national agenda.