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A Nonprofit's Guide to Voter Registration

www.nonprofitvote.org

Prepared by the
Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network
A national nonpartisan program of
Minnesota Council of Nonprofits



A NONPROFIT’S GUIDE TO VOTER REGISTRATION

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www.nonprofitvote.org

A national nonpartisan program of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits

The Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network (NVEN) is dedicated to expanding the role of America’s nonprofits in voting and elections. NVEN works with state nonprofit VOTE initiatives and its national website to provide resources and tools for 501(c)(3) nonprofits to help their communities participate and vote.

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INTRODUCTION

Voter registration is a first step toward increased voter and civic engagement in your community. Every registered voter has the potential to impact the outcome of an election. But equally important, more registered voters means more **power for your community** and more **clout for your nonprofit**.

Who votes matters. Consider this: in the past four Congressional elections, a shift of ten thousand votes would have changed the outcome of more than two hundred Congressional, Senate and Gubernatorial races. At the state and local levels, elections are regularly won and lost by less than one thousand votes and sometimes even less than one hundred votes.

The benefits of registering voters in your community extend far beyond the outcome of any single election:

Candidates and elected officials know who votes. That's right. They know which communities turn out and in what numbers. They even know how many times you've voted. More registered voters in your community means more attention from candidates. This will give your constituents more opportunities to hear directly from the candidates on the issues that affect their lives. Once elected, these public officials will be more accountable to your community.

Clout for your nonprofit. Whether your organization seeks to increase government funding, change a law or ordinance, or simply heighten awareness about your issue or community, registering voters will help to advance your goals. When your nonprofit starts registering voters, candidates will take notice! Elected officials will recognize your organization as one with an engaged community of voters and will be more likely to return your phone calls and listen to your needs as an organization.

Power for your community. Voting is one important way of engaging in the life of your community. A registered voter is more likely to participate in local affairs, connect with neighbors and volunteer in the community. Nonprofits go to great lengths to improve the lives of the people they serve. Registering your clients and constituents to vote is a critical means for them to become advocates for themselves, their families and their communities. When you talk to your constituents about registering to vote, you are telling them that their voice matters in determining what is best for their community.

As important as voter registration is, it's only the first step. Once your nonprofit ensures that your community is registered, there are many opportunities to educate them about the voting process and make sure they get to the polls on Election Day. Visit www.nonprofitvote.org for free downloadable toolkits on nonprofit voter education and get-out-the-vote.

Every nonprofit is different. Your voter registration activities should compliment your relationships with clients and constituents, and should be integrated into the ongoing work and mission of your organization. When planning voter engagement activities, consider the kind of contact you have with your constituents, members and volunteers. How can you maximize these interactions as an opportunity for voter registration?

NONPROFIT VOTER REGISTRATION: THE BASICS

Combine voter registration with one or more of your organization's existing activities,

such as client intake, one-on-one interactions between clients and social workers, staff and board meetings or outreach at a community event. Nonprofits are best equipped for registering voters through their existing relationships. **Start small!** Start with your inner circle.

Many nonprofit employees are surprised to find that even their own co-workers and board members may not be registered to vote or need to re-register due to change of address or name. Bring some voter registration forms into your office and "door-knock" your co-workers.

Make a Plan

- Plan ahead for when and where you will conduct your voter registration activities.
- Assign a staff member, volunteer or committee to plan and direct voter participation activities.
- The most effective voter registration efforts occur in the month leading up to your state's voter registration deadline. However, in order to take advantage of that time, your organization needs a plan!

Get Buy-In

- Educate and engage the leaders of your organization around the importance of nonpartisan nonprofit voter engagement. Your efforts will be more successful when you have support from your organization's leadership.

Publicize Your Activities

- Let people know that you are registering voters. Place "register to vote here" signs in your lobby or where you offer services. Contact www.nonprofitvote.org to access nonpartisan materials such as t-shirts, buttons and posters to build excitement around an election.
- Announce registration deadlines at events, in newsletters, in email alerts or on your website.
- Inform your elected officials and the broader community that your organization is registering voters. This will help to build clout for your organization and will encourage the broader community to engage voters as well.

Educate

- Provide information on the logistics of the election, e.g. date, polling hours, ID requirements etc. Contact your local board of election or visit www.nonprofitvote.org for additional information.
- Help your constituents find out who and what is on their ballot.
- Highlight reasons to vote — issues that matter to your organization, increased clout for your neighborhood, etc.

Identify Partners

- Identify nonprofit partners in your neighborhood or in the same interest area as your organization and encourage them to register voters. Local libraries, schools and small businesses can also be great partners in your voter registration efforts.

BEING NONPARTISAN

Like all election activities, 501(c)(3) nonprofits must carry out voter registration on a nonpartisan basis. Additionally, being nonpartisan will benefit your voter engagement work. Nonpartisanship reinforces your organizational status as a trusted community institution that is respectful of the personal views of your clients and constituents. Finally, many new and infrequent voters are wary of partisan politics. Your nonpartisanship allows you to have conversations with your community that bring politics back to the real issues affecting their lives.

Whatever your personal views, being nonpartisan when representing your nonprofit is relatively straightforward and easy. But, be prepared for people to attempt to engage you in a partisan discussion. When training staff and volunteers to register voters, it can be helpful to role-play such a scenario. For example:

Registrant: Who should I vote for?

Nonprofit Employee or Volunteer: Great question! However, we are a nonpartisan organization, not supporting any specific candidate or party. We just want to make sure that you have everything you need to access your right to vote and to select the candidate that is best for you. Here is some literature to help you find out more about the candidates and issues at stake in this election.

Registrant: Which candidate is best on the issues that matter to this organization?

Nonprofit Employee or Volunteer: We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and are nonpartisan. Here are websites and phone numbers to contact to find out where the candidates stand on some of the big issues.

Funding Issues

Does the federal government allow voter registration by federally funded agencies?

YES. In fact, the National Voter Registration Act mandates many state and federal agencies to offer voter registration to their clients.

There are only three exceptions — Head Start, AmeriCorps and Legal Services Corporation funds. These three agencies have federal regulations barring agency sponsored voter registration by employees.

What if a funder stipulates that funds may not be used for voter registration?

This is rare. More commonly, a grant agreement re-states the IRS guideline the 501(c)(3) that funds cannot be used to conduct partisan political activities. However, if a grant from a private foundation has a clause prohibiting even nonpartisan voter registration, it is fully permissible to use other monies — from donations, community foundations, state funds, etc. — for your registration activities. In practice, the cost of most nonprofit registration activities is low.

VOTER REGISTRATION FORMS

Filling out voter registration forms is easy, once you've done it a few times. But, there are a few important things to remember when registering voters.

How to Get the Registration Forms

- **Large Quantities:** Contact your Secretary of State or State Election Board.
- **Small Quantities:** Contact your Secretary of State or local Board of Elections.
- **Individual Forms:** Access and print individual forms online. Some states allow voters to fill in their registration information online before printing.

Note: Arizona and Washington have become the first states to offer direct online voter registration where voters can fill out and submit their registration online. To find out who to contact for voter registration forms in your state, visit www.nonprofitvote.org and click on your state.

How to Return Completed Registration Forms

- **Plan to collect the completed registration form from the voter you are registering, and return it to the appropriate location.** If the person says they will mail in the form, assure them that you are turning in many people's cards and can make sure that theirs gets to the right place in time.
- **Return completed forms to the registrant's local Board of Elections or Secretary of State's Office:** You may return the forms in person or by mail, but in person is preferable

in most states. The address of your local election board office can be found at www.nonprofitvote.org.

- **Turn in forms promptly:** Designate a staff person to return completed registration forms to the appropriate location on a regular basis (many organizations set weekly or bi-weekly dates to return completed forms). Some states require completed forms to be turned in within a certain period of time after the form is signed and dated. Check with your state election board regarding deadline policy.

Know the Deadlines for Voter Registration

- **Find registration deadlines for major state and federal elections** by visiting www.nonprofitvote.org and clicking on your state. Find the deadlines for other elections by calling or checking the website of your state or local Board of Elections.
- **Forms generally must be delivered or post-marked by 5pm on the day of the deadline.** Be sure to check your state's policy.



A Few Things to Remember About Voter Registration Forms

When you are registering a voter, help them fill out the form and double check the mandatory information requirements to make sure their registration is accepted. Voter registration forms differ from state to state. The following is a list of information that is generally mandatory on every registration form. Also, always remind the registrants to bring their ID to the polls — even if it is not required in your state!

- **Citizenship and Age Requirement**
Checkboxes: Be sure to check both of these boxes “yes”. In order to register to vote you must be a citizen of the United States and you must be 18 years old or older by the next election. If you fail to check these boxes, your registration will be invalid.
- **Name and Residence Address:** You must give a street address. PO Boxes or work addresses may not be used as a residence address. Use a PO Box address only for your mailing address.
- **Identification:** Most states’ forms ask for a Driver’s License or State ID number or the last four digits of your Social Security number. If you don’t have any of these, write “none”. However, be aware that not providing either of the preferred IDs can put a registration under scrutiny. Review other forms of acceptable ID in your state by visiting www.nonprofitvote.org and clicking on your state.
- **Date of Birth, Signature and Date:** Always mandatory. Surprisingly, registrants frequently forget one of these.
- **Other Common Fields:** Change of Name or Change of Address; Party Affiliation.

Election Day Registration

Several states allow voters to register and vote on Election Day.

If you live in an “EDR state,” review the identification requirements for registering to vote at the polls. Most EDR states also have deadlines for pre-registration. The following states offer Election Day or a kind of “same-day” registration.

- **EDR States:** Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Wyoming.
- **North Carolina** allows early voters to register at the same time they cast their ballot up until three days before Election Day.
- **North Dakota** is the only state that does not require voter registration.

For more information: www.nonprofitvote.org/electionreform
or www.demos.org

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do I have to re-register for each election?

No. However you must re-register if you have moved or changed your name since the last election OR if you did not vote in the last two national elections.

What if I registered but didn't receive anything in the mail from the Secretary of State?

You should receive a card to confirm your registration within a few weeks of registering. If you do not, you should call your board of elections office and ask them to check if your registration was accepted. Many states now allow you to check your registration status online.

What about enrolling in a political party?

For states that ask you to designate a political party, you can choose a party recognized by that state or register as what your state may refer to as "not enrolled", "unaffiliated" or "no party designation".

Can someone with a past felony conviction register and vote?

In most states, ex-offenders are eligible to vote after completing the terms of their sentence. This can include parole and probation. However, laws around ex-felon re-enfranchisement differ from state to state and some states place additional restrictions on former felons and voting.

Can someone who is homeless register and vote?

Yes. Homeless voters should use the street address of a homeless shelter that will accept mail for them. In some states, homeless voters can name an intersection.

What about victims of domestic violence?

Many states have confidentiality protection for victims of domestic violence. Contact your Secretary of State to find out more about your state's procedures to protect victims of violence.

Where should a college student register to vote?

A student may register and vote at either their home address/permanent residence or at the address where they live at school. If a student chooses to register and vote at or near school, they should make sure that they check what ID is needed.

How can I convince someone to register if they do not want to?

Make a personal appeal. What do they care about? What issues affect their family? How do those things relate to voting? If that doesn't work, give them some information; tell them you would like to speak with them again if they change their mind.

For further information on these questions and the rules in your state please visit www.nonprofitvote.org

VOTER REGISTRATION: IN YOUR OFFICE

There are many benefits of doing voter registration in your agency or office. Your organization is trusted and respected within your community. And the people come to you! People are more likely to register and to vote if your organization is doing the registration. Voter registration strengthens advocacy work and builds your community base of support for the issues that matter to your organization.

**REGISTER
TO VOTE
HERE**

Who

- **Start with your board of directors:** Are they registered? Ask to put “voter registration activities” on the agenda of your next board meeting. Strengthen your voter registration efforts by encouraging your board to support your agency in encouraging active citizenship within the community.
- **Staff and volunteers:** “Door knock” your office to find out if your staff and volunteers need to register or update their registrations. You may be surprised at how many of your colleagues take advantage of this opportunity. Plan a brief (and fun) training with your staff to make sure everyone is comfortable with registering voters.
- **Clients and constituents:** Create a simple system for integrating voter registration into your work with clients and constituents. Register clients at intake and during one-on-one interactions with service providers. This is your opportunity to help your community be their own best voice.

How

- **Make registration a part of your ongoing work.** Be creative! You know your community best. Voter registration need not be its own activity — it works best when integrated into your organization’s daily interactions with community members, volunteers, and constituents. Provide multiple opportunities for registration during the client intake process, volunteer trainings, at service sites and community events.
- **Set up a space in your lobby** with voter registration cards and information about how to register and vote. Next to the registration cards and information, place a drop box for completed registrations. Designate a staff person or volunteer to regularly collect and return these completed forms.
- **Advertise.** Identify your organization as a place to register and learn about voting. Use signage to raise awareness of the registration deadline and the upcoming election. Visit www.nonprofitvote.org to download or order free signage for your office.
- **Train staff and volunteers** on how to do voter registration. And make it fun! Volunteers and staff should know how to fill out the registration form, how to answer basic questions and where to return completed registrations.
- **Designate a staff person to turn in completed registration forms.** Set up a regular schedule for turning in registrations. Different states have different requirements about when to return completed registration forms to the Secretary of State or local Board of Elections.
- **Be sure the voter registration is accepted.** This is important. Depending on your capacity, there are two options. Remind people to look for a postcard in 2–3 weeks confirming their registration. Or, tell them to go online in the growing number of states and counties that let them check their registration on a website (more in box below). If you keep copies of the forms for follow up or a database, you can check on behalf of the voter either online or with your local registrar.

When

- **Year-round:** Year-round registration has to be something that you can sustain and maintain. Leave registration forms out in a public area, offer voter registration as part of the regular services you already provide or make it a policy to ask about voter registration for all new staff, volunteers, clients and board members.
- **Closer to the deadline:** Voter registration is most effective closer to the deadlines for registration. Near the deadlines, you will want to make more of a concerted effort to register voters and publicize your efforts.

Am I Registered to Vote?

How to Find Out Online

- Use the “Find out if You're Registered” lookup at the Can I Vote website of the National Association of Secretaries of States (www.canivote.org). It lists states and counties with voter look up tools.
- Use your state’s voter registration page on our website (www.nonprofitvote.org) for the statewide link.
- Check the website of your State Election office or County/Local Board of Election

VOTER REGISTRATION: IN YOUR COMMUNITY

“Tabling” is when your organization sets up a table at a public event or in a high-traffic area to provide information about your nonprofit and the services you provide. Tabling is also a great opportunity to register voters — and it’s easy!

Voter registration can be readily combined with the other outreach activities conducted at your table — and it may even attract more people to learn about your organization. Tabling is also a great way to engage your constituents and volunteers in registering community members to vote.

Where

Ideally, tabling should take place at an event where people will be familiar with your organization.

- Nonprofit events and conferences
- Community events
- Block parties
- Supermarkets or busy areas
- College campuses
- School events
- Places of worship — churches, synagogues, mosques

Tips for Tabling

- **Be proactive.** Don’t be shy! Stand up with your clipboard in front of your table, approach people passing by, or send volunteers out into the crowd to register people.
- **Combine voter registration with other activities at your table.** Distribute information about your organization, upcoming events, and upcoming elections (especially special elections or primaries) or have a petition to sign.
- **Make it entertaining.** Entice passersby with giveaways such as candy or stickers. Make your table kid-friendly with a game or activity and know the registration forms well enough to make it fun.
- **Make it visible.** Post a REGISTER TO VOTE HERE! sign at your table.
- **Plan ahead.** Make sure you have all of the necessary materials for your table, train volunteers on registering voters, and develop a method for collecting and turning in completed voter registration forms.

“Voter registration can be readily combined with the other outreach activities conducted at your table — and it may even attract more people to learn about your organization.”

Preparing For

- **Set dates, hours and locations.** Make sure to get permission from the community event coordinator or manager or owner of the site. Let them know in advance that you will be offering nonpartisan voter registration at your table.
- **Recruit and train volunteers.** Tabling and registering voters are great activities for volunteers! Make sure that everyone is comfortable with the registration form.
- **Get your supplies.** Find out from the event coordinator, what they will be providing and what you will be expected to bring. You will need:
 - A table and chairs
 - Tape
 - Scissors
 - Voter registration forms
 - Pens
 - Clipboards
 - Informational materials about your organization
 - Signage
 - Treats or giveaways

When

- **Most effective near the deadlines and elections.** Registering voters while tabling is most effective in the weeks and months leading up to the voter registration deadline.
- **Other times during year.** Voter registration can be easily incorporated into other outreach activities throughout the year. Just keep a stack of forms with your tabling materials. People frequently need to change or update their registrations due to change of address or name. Also – don't forget about important primaries or ballot measures that take place outside of November election dates.

What about door-to-door voter registration?

Door-to-door voter registration has been popular in the past. Today, the landscape is changing. In most cases, the easiest and most effective way to register a new voter is where they go to learn, work, receive services and build community. Door-to-door voter registration — as the sole goal of a canvass — is not the most effective method for most 501(c)(3) nonprofits.

Canvassing is resource intensive. A nonprofit should consider the cost/benefit and the other ways to use staff and volunteers to register voters. At any given hour on any given day only a portion of residents will be home and only a portion of those will be willing to register. Staff and volunteers can spend a great deal of time walking and knocking without any registrations. Plus, if you are knocking on the doors of strangers, you are unable to leverage your organization's existing relationships — the most effective way to build new voters for long-term democratic participation.

However, there are certain organizations and circumstances for which a canvass can be very effective for registering voters — for example:

- If your organization has an existing canvass for agency outreach, publicizing an event, etc.
- Your constituents live together in a building or housing complex.
- You have a large pool of volunteers and an up-to-date voter file that shows you which people in your neighborhood are already registered.
- You're registering voters for a local election, in which the results of a single small neighborhood or precinct can make a big difference.
- Your organization is a jurisdiction-specific agency, working on relevant issues specific to the neighborhood.

OTHER RESOURCES

Demos, www.demos.org

Election Assistance Commission,
www.eac.gov

Independent Sector, www.independentsector.org

League of Women Voters, www.lwv.org

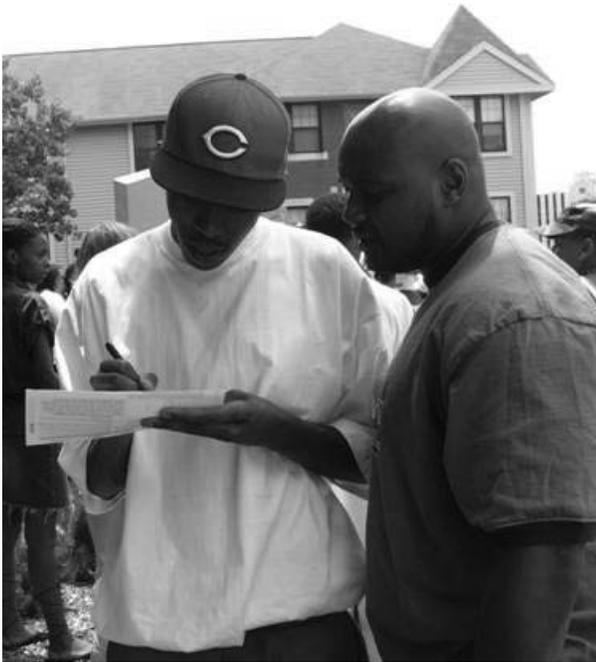
National Association of Secretaries of States
www.nass.org

National Council of Nonprofit Organizations,
www.ncna.org

Overseas Vote Foundation (for voters
overseas and in the armed services),
www.overseasvotefoundation.org

Project Vote, www.projectvote.org

Rock the Vote, www.rockthevote.org



501(c)(3) Nonprofits: The Sleeping Giants of Democracy

Nonprofits and charities have an important role to play in encouraging voter and civic participation. Nonprofits are trusted as neutral brokers with the best interests of the community in mind. Your credibility among clients and constituents enables your organization to reach even the most discouraged voters.

Two practical considerations make nonprofits particularly effective at encouraging greater voter participation. First, many nonprofits work with precisely those communities who are most affected by low turnout and underrepresentation. Second, many nonprofits have built relationships with their clients and constituents over a long period of time, enabling them to have a sustained impact on the civic engagement of their communities.

A NONPROFIT VOTER REGISTRATION CHECKLIST

Cut out this page on the dotted line and use both sides of this sheet to make your plan and guide your progress.

Who to Register

Who	Year-Round	Near the Deadline
<input type="checkbox"/> Staff and Volunteers	<input type="checkbox"/> Offer to register all new hires and incoming volunteers	<input type="checkbox"/> "Door-knock" your office to register new voters and update registrations for anyone who has moved or changed names
<input type="checkbox"/> Board of Directors	<input type="checkbox"/> Get buy-in from your board on voter engagement activities	<input type="checkbox"/> Help board members register or update their registration at a regularly scheduled board meeting near the deadline
<input type="checkbox"/> Constituents	<input type="checkbox"/> Offer in-office registration year-round	<input type="checkbox"/> Plan a concerted voter registration drive closer to an election. Publicize your activities within your community and make it fun and festive!
<input type="checkbox"/> Neighborhood	<input type="checkbox"/> Combine voter registration with other community and outreach events	<input type="checkbox"/> Try to procure a table at as many community events as possible

A NONPROFIT VOTER REGISTRATION CHECKLIST

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MATERIALS FOR IN-OFFICE REGISTRATION

- Voter registration forms
- Access to the internet to find polling place locations, print off forms and find answers to voter registration questions
- Contact information for local election board or Secretary of State
- Posters publicizing your office as a nonpartisan place to register to vote

MATERIALS FOR TABLING

- Voter registration forms
- Basic election information, such as how to find your polling place
- Your organization's outreach materials
- Pens, clipboards, table and chairs
- Big signs
- Balloons, decorations and giveaways

STAFFING

- Designate a staff member or volunteer to coordinate your organization's voter engagement efforts
- Volunteers for events, tabling, etc.
- Training on how to fill out voter registration forms and where to go for more information on the election

PUBLICITY

- Announce voter registration activities as well as deadlines for voter registration in newsletter, emails, etc.
- Tell your elected officials about your voter participation activities
- Advertise with posters around your agency

OTHER

- Designate a staff member or volunteer to regularly turn in registration forms
- Photocopy forms for follow up with new registrants
- Plan your voter education and GOTV activities

UNIVERSAL VOTER REGISTRATION

How does universal voter registration work?

In all advanced democracies — and many new ones — governments and election officials work proactively to ensure all eligible voters are registered to vote. Laws make registering to vote easy and even automatic.

Why isn't there universal registration in the U.S.?

Because we're one of the oldest democracies in the world. We began registering voters 200 years ago when only a limited number of people even had the right to vote. Voter registration was at first intended not only to keep track of voters but to limit voting among new immigrants and freed slaves. Democracies after 1900 began with a stronger concept of the universal franchise.

Will this country move towards registration for all?

We have already. It started in the 1970's when Minnesota, Wisconsin and Maine adopted Election Day Registration (EDR). Since then five more states — Idaho, Iowa, Montana, New Hampshire and Wyoming have followed their lead. A second big shift came in 1993 with passage of the National Voter Registration or "Motor Voter" Act. NVRA requires states to offer registration when getting a driver's license or seeking public assistance.

Have these measures helped?

Yes, but mainly in states with EDR. In other states motor voter has helped but in a limited way. Many states have never fully implemented NVRA. Today nearly one-third of eligible voters in the U.S. remain outside the voter rolls.

Is there any reason not to have universal registration?

Some say voting is a privilege, justifying extra steps by the voter. The problem is that as soon as voter registration is not universal it opens the door to keeping some groups out — in particular, less resourced, more mobile and younger populations.

Election Day Registration Resources

- **Demos:** A Network of Ideas, www.demos.org
Check out a wealth of national and state materials on adopting Election Day Registration in your state.
- **Electionline.org/Pew Center on the States**, www.pewcenteronthestates.org
Read electionline.org's 2007 study Election Day Registration: A Case Study
Compare registration laws in the 50 states and link to more information.
- **Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network** — www.nonprofitvote.org Our website has a special page about Election Day Registration in its election reform section.

Universal or Automatic Voter Registration Resources

- **Fair Vote** — Right to Vote Initiative, www.fair-vote.org
- **New America Foundation** — Political Reform Program, www.newamerica.net

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