

Repairing Democracy At All Levels - The Critical Agenda For Reformers In 2021 (by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

Democracy at all levels of government is badly in need of protection and repair in 2021. As the new year begins, we are coming to the end of an historic assault by President Trump and his allies on this country's legitimate Presidential election process. At no previous time in U.S. history has a candidate mounted a major effort to overturn an election. Not only have these disgraceful actions put our system at immediate risk, but it will require longterm measures to regain the trust of voters who believe the President's claims of "a rigged election."

Beyond this debacle, reformers have their hands full with a host of governance and political campaign problems. Common Cause, both at the national and state levels, appears to be ready to take on this critical agenda for 2021. Recent announcements from this citizen-based reform organization showcase the issues that it plans to address in the coming months. They include redistricting reform, protecting voting rights, making registering and voting an easier process for people, and advocating for reforms that lessen the influence of "big money" on the political process.

Communiques from Common Cause Ohio reveal that this state needs improvement on all these issues. Coming off the November election, the Ohio chapter is planning to promote procedures that make it easier for people to vote while also guarding against expected efforts in the General Assembly to diminish this access and to restrict voting rights. "The pandemic," argues Catherine Turcer, Executive Director of Common Cause Ohio, "revealed the importance of making voting by mail or absentee voting a process that voters can easily utilize." She also noted that on-site early voting procedures need improvement such as providing more places where voters can cast their ballots.

Automatic Voter Registration, however, will be the major voting reform that Common Cause will propose this year in Ohio and other states. In recent years, Republican dominated state legislatures including Ohio's have made registering to vote a more arduous task for people, especially low-income citizens who often don't have the time or resources to jump through bureaucratic hoops. Automatic registration would be a major step toward making voting a right rather than a privilege that must be earned. "Eligible voters," explains Turcer, "would be automatically registered to vote when they provide basic information to a state office in steps like renewing their license plates or their driver's licenses at a local BMV." Opposition to such a change must be expected, she affirmed, and a major citizen advocacy campaign will be needed to bring this reform to fruition.

Ohio's recent experience with bribery and "dark money" in the process of financing legislation such as the bailout of bankrupt nuclear power plants impels Common Cause to support steps that will begin to curb the power of "big money" in corrupting our political and governmental processes. At the moment, advocating for stronger disclosure legislation remains a top priority for this organization and others. Clearly more and stronger laws are needed beyond disclosure, but they will take time, brains and energy to bring about. The Supreme Court with cases such as Citizens United and Buckley versus Valeo have made campaign finance reform very difficult in this country.

"Finally, 2021 is the year," declared Catherine Turcer, "to insure that our redistricting reforms in Ohio work effectively." After the old process produced highly gerrymandered Congressional and state districts in 2011, Common Cause, the League of Women Voters, and other activists got behind two Ohio Constitutional Amendment proposals that aimed to end this traditionally unfair method of creating political districts after each U.S. Census. "Although not perfect," continued Turcer, "these Amendments, passed by the voters in 2015 and 2018, essentially outlaw one party gerrymandering. They both also require the drawing of more compact geographic districts that would eliminate some of the sprawling, weirdly shaped entities that protect Republican Congressmen and legislators." Thus, even left to be drawn without major citizen involvement, the processes established by the two Amendments will produce fairer districts than we have now. However, elected representatives are still involved in drawing these new district lines, and Turcer believes that citizen activists must become heavily involved to insure Ohioans will end up with the truly "fair" districts they deserve. Both Amendments require public hearings and the opportunity for citizens to submit their own proposed district maps, and Common Cause plans to take full advantage of these openings for citizen input. Turcer is currently working with the League of Women Voters and others to build a sufficient statewide coalition to insure significant citizen impact on these new redistricting procedures.

Thus, reformers confront a lot of work ahead of them in the months ahead. Common Cause Ohio is now recruiting citizens for their involvement in everything from promoting voting rights to insuring fair redistricting. As Catherine Turcer declared in a recent communique: "We the people have enormous power if we choose to participate!"