

One Person, One Vote



**How Changing
Our Voting System
Will Get Us Out of the
Mess We're In**

W. R. Wilkerson III



*For Al Gore,
who won the presidency of the United States
through national voting in November 2000
but was not allowed to take office*

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PREFACE

Does your vote count? Are you sure? I'm not. We all complain about the government. We all have strong opinions about taxes, illegal immigration, high gas prices, and two current wars that show no signs of ending. Had we the people been able to vote on all these key issues, they would have been resolved long ago. But we don't get to vote on them; we're allowed to vote only for politicians—who don't seem to get around to solving the problems that face us. We don't vote to elect members of the Supreme Court, we don't get to decide on issues such as gun control or same-sex marriage, and we certainly don't get to vote for tax reform, though I'll bet a lot of us would like to.

I wrote this book for two reasons. The first is my frustration over the presidential election of 2000. Al Gore clearly won the national vote by over 400,000 votes, but in presidential elections, the popular vote is not the one that counts. Our votes were hijacked by the Supreme Court, which made a decision for us and ruled five to four that George W. Bush was to be the forty-third president of the United States. A president of the United States was voted into office with only five votes. What happened to the other 105 million votes?¹

The second reason I wrote this book is because of the terrible apathy too many Americans feel about elections. If given the chance, Americans love to vote. In 2007, 74 million votes were cast in the finale of *American Idol*. But when it comes to national elections, many people don't bother because they don't believe their votes really matter.

My son, who is in his early twenties, does not vote. When I ask him why he doesn't, his reply is always the same: "My vote doesn't count." And to a great degree, he is right. People are staying away from the polls because they look around and see that key decisions are being made by the few, rather than by the millions. They believe that their votes are worthless when a few people can overturn their decision later.

What's the solution? How can we change our broken system?

Americans are smart enough to figure out a path for our country, to know how to move forward past the endless debates about abortion, gun control, free speech, universal health-care, terrorism, taxation, immigration, the national debt, and more. Isn't it time we had a real voice in these issues instead of sending someone to Washington to get stuck in the continual wrangling and to add layers of "pork" to every bill for the benefit of special interests?

National voting, sometimes called direct democracy, would give us that voice, and in this book I'll lay out my recipe for change and explain how national voting would work. Keep in mind that this book is only the very first step. We'll need to work together to construct a national voting system piece by piece. My goal is to start a national conversation. Once we agree that national voting will get our country out of the mess

it's in, we can work out all the details. After all, we've had our Constitution for over two hundred years and we're still tinkering with it. If I tried to cover every possibility here, *One Person, One Vote* would be about nine hundred pages long and very technical. I want to inspire you, not bore you with a lot of fine print.

In the second half of the book you'll get a chance to try national voting for yourself and vote on thirty-one important issues facing our country today. Once national voting is in place, it will probably be impractical to vote on such a large number of issues in a single election. I'm including so many issues here because I want every one of you to find at least a few that you care passionately about. And I want you to discover for yourself that national voting can settle issues of all kinds—questions about government, citizens' rights and responsibilities, personal liberty, taxes and spending, international issues, law and order, and even life and death issues. For each issue, you'll read a summary of both sides, pro and con. Then you can decide for yourself where you stand. That's what democracy means.

I've included a sample ballot so you can express your opinions on all these issues and mail your ballot to the White House.

In the appendices you'll find a list of online resources that will help you learn more, as well as information on how to get in touch with your elected officials.

Throughout the book you'll find true stories—from our history and more recent times—about elections that were very, very close. Important issues and races were decided by tiny margins—often as little as a single vote. Some people might think this is a contradiction. Who cares about squeaker elections decided by a handful of votes? If our votes can be

overturned by a judge, they believe, then voting is just a waste of time. But I passionately believe in voting, and I think that deep down most Americans do too.

This book is about why we need more voting, not less. We desperately need national voting, and until we can make it a reality, we have to keep voting every chance we get. Be inspired by these stories. Your vote does matter. That's why the people in power keep trying to take it away from you.

W. R. WILKERSON III

February 2008



PART ONE

National Voting

Power to the People

Why do so many of us feel disenfranchised and disconnected from our government? The answer is simple. Our political system does not work for us. It does not hear our voices. Over and over we have tried going to the polls and casting ballots on issues we feel passionate about. We have celebrated when our measure “won”—only to see it overturned by a single judge who was appointed, not voted into office. So we don't bother to vote anymore. Why should we when our votes don't count?

But what if we took the power back and made decisions for ourselves? What would our country be like? What would our lives be like?

1

It's Time for a Second American Revolution



The U.S. electoral system is broken beyond repair—let’s throw it out and start over! Does that solution sound too radical? Consider the system we have now.

First, in close elections, nearly half the voters end up with elected officials who don’t represent their views. In an electoral system where one candidate wins and all the others lose, a lot of people really have no representation in Congress, their state legislatures, and the governor’s office—because they didn’t vote for the winning candidate. Only the winner gets a voice—even when that winner earned less than half the votes cast in a race involving three or more candidates.

Second, unlike in most of the civilized world, legitimate third parties have no real voice. In a winner-take-all voting system, as we have in most of the United States, tremendous pressure is put on third-party candidates not to mount campaigns—and on voters not to vote for them—because they’re seen as “spoilers” who allow other candidates to take office without a majority vote. This system excludes creative and original thinkers who can provide real solutions to our nation’s problems. And it restricts the choices of the people who want to vote their consciences.

Third, many people in the United States vote with paperless electronic machines that cannot be trusted to count votes accurately or be free of tampering. You'll read more about this issue in chapter 5.

Finally, because of the way campaigns are funded, elected officials are captives of the corporate special interests who pay for their campaigns. Our representatives see themselves as accountable to private interests, not to the people who elected them.

Even when it works, our current electoral system has serious problems:

- The process of crafting legislation has been kidnapped by special interests. Even simple, straightforward changes get bogged down in the endless process of inserting favors to special interests and “earmarking” pet projects that have nothing to do with the issue at hand.
- So many amendments get inserted into bills that the policy goals are often lost.
- The bills themselves can run to hundreds or even thousands of pages. Nobody has time to read them, and legislators don't always know exactly what they're voting on.
- Wrangling over compromises keeps the real issues off the table. They don't get voted on, and the problems don't change.

WE THE PEOPLE DON'T BOTHER TO VOTE

The United States has some of the lowest election participation rates in the world. People think their votes don't matter, so they don't bother voting. Of the 142 million people who were registered to vote in the 2004 presidential election, 11 percent

said they did not vote because they were not interested in the election or felt their votes would not make a difference.¹

Of the 32 million people who were not even registered to vote in 2004, 15 million (47 percent) reported that they were not interested in the election or were not involved in politics. Four percent said their votes would not make a difference.²

WHEN WE DO VOTE, OUR VOTES ARE IGNORED

We pride ourselves that our system of government is based on fairness. But fairness is not something that can be determined by the courts or the government. It can be determined only by the people. Is it fair that a single judge can strike down a measure that millions have voted for? In 1994, for instance, 59 percent of the voters in California cast their ballots in favor of Proposition 187, a controversial measure to deny health benefits and education to illegal immigrants. On March 19, 1998, the measure was struck down by a single federal judge, Mariana Pfaelzer, thus denying the voters their prerogative.³

ANOTHER SQUEAKER ELECTION

In November 2005, Michael Sessions, an eighteen-year-old high school senior, won the mayoral race in Hillsdale, Michigan (population 9,000), by beating the fifty-one-year-old incumbent 732 to 668.⁴ Sessions ran as a write-in candidate because initially he was too young to be placed on the ballot. He used \$700 from a summer job to fund his door-to-door campaign. ☆



WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

The awful truth is that we the people do not decide the outcome of many elections. The courts do. We don't make the key decisions that affect our lives. The courts do.

Should the Supreme Court, or any court, be able to overrule the will and wishes of millions of Americans? That's a very good question. In case we've forgotten, nine judges, not the people of this country, decided the presidential election of 2000. In one of the closest elections in U.S. history, George W. Bush was declared the winner by a Supreme Court decision that ended the debate about Florida's twenty-five electoral votes.⁵ What good is the will of the people if the courts have the ability to overturn our votes and decisions?

What does it tell us when the Supreme Court decides a presidential election? What does it say when millions of Americans vote passionately for a measure, only to have it struck down by a court or a single judge? It tells us very clearly that whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, your vote is often hijacked. Is it right for a few Americans to overturn the wishes of millions of other Americans? Is that fair? Is that democracy?

The simple truth is, if we are not allowed to vote, we do not live in a democracy.

A REPUBLIC, NOT A DEMOCRACY

In school, we are taught that we live in a republic. And in case we forget, the Pledge of Allegiance reminds us of this when we chant, "and to the Republic for which it stands." The dictionary defines a republic as "a country in which the supreme power rests in the body of citizens entitled to vote and is exercised by representatives chosen directly or indirectly by them."⁶

ANOTHER SQUEAKER ELECTION

In 2000, George W. Bush won the presidential election by only 537 votes (some sources say 527). This election was one of the few times in United States history that a candidate won the presidency while losing the nationwide popular vote. The contest hinged on Florida, where that state's twenty-five electoral votes were decided by an official vote count of 537 (or 527) in favor of Bush out of a Florida total of about 6 million votes. In the end, the Supreme Court decided the election, but a few thousand votes one way or another in Florida might have brought a concession speech by one of the contenders and avoided a court-decided victory.⁷ ☆



Is a republic different from a democracy? Yes, very different. Here's why: In a democracy, everyone participates. Everyone's vote counts. Instead, we live in a republic, one that many believe has turned into a bureaucracy.

THE ONLY VOICE THAT MATTERS

Politicians pass laws without consulting us, their constituents. They freely spend our money without consulting us. They lead us into wars without our consent. Our political system is set up in this fashion because the country's founders believed that the citizens needed safeguards when making their decisions.

Maybe back in the eighteenth century, this idea made sense. But today, America has a well-educated population. America's

citizens are perfectly capable of making their own decisions on matters that affect them. And they should be making those decisions. In the end, we have just one inalienable right: the right to decide our fate for ourselves.

America belongs to us, its citizens. The Constitution is not an antique document but the will and wishes of the people—us. Our voices are the only voices that matter.

With national voting, we would have the final say in the critical issues that face us, such as whether illegal immigration should be tolerated, how our taxes should be spent, and whether drugs should be decriminalized.

Politicians are public servants. They work for us; we do not work for them. If they are not doing their jobs to our satisfaction, it is time for us to do the work for ourselves. As my father used to say, “If you want something done, do it yourself.”