

Is Illinois Ready for Reform?

By Jim Nowlan

I spoke recently about political reform with an audience of savvy seniors in a lifelong learning program. They were frustrated but not despondent about the health of our American democracy. The big question was whether reforms in our political processes could improve things and, if so, are the reforms likely to be enacted.

The seniors were concerned about such things as low voter turnout, the role of money in politics (as well as that of lobbyists who often bestow the money on officials), gerrymandering of legislative districts to favor one party and incumbents, negative campaigning, and the excessive desire of officials to stay in office.

To address these and other problems, my audience had many suggestions for reform, some of which are practicable, and others which are not likely to be implemented, at least not in Illinois. Let's look at several:

- Make it easier to vote. Illinois has early voting, which is becoming popular. Some states have gone strictly to mail-in balloting. This is not likely to be approved in Illinois, because of concerns about ballot security.
- Shorten the election calendar. Some states don't hold their primaries until September. In recent decades, Illinois has never gone later than June; in 2012 the primary elections will be in March. Incumbents like a long calendar, as it doesn't give challengers much time to get started. Don't expect a short calendar.

- Public financing of campaigns. The group, which tended to the liberal side, I sensed, liked this option. About half the states have public financing for some offices. In these states, candidates must show they are credible by raising so many small donations. Once qualified, the candidates receive modest amounts of public financing and agree to not raise other funds. The Illinois legislature is not likely to enact this because it could benefit challengers.
- Redistricting. Have an independent group rather than legislators draw their own district lines. This is basically done in Iowa. A statewide coalition that includes the League of Women Voters circulated petitions to put this issue on the Illinois ballot in 2010, but came up short; the coalition vows to make another effort.
- Term limits. The audience was ambivalent about this idea. On the one hand, it would protect against officeholders staying for decades, possibly becoming unresponsive to the voters. On the other, there are “term limits” at every election if the voters so decide. In addition, said some, public officials need time in office to get up to speed.

Campaign contributions represented another area where the seniors wanted reforms. Because of pressure from reform groups, Illinois recently enacted its first ever campaign contribution limits--\$5,000 for individuals to candidates; \$10,000 for corporations and associations. But this topic has become complicated by a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision which declared that corporations, unions and non-profit organizations could make unlimited contributions to independent

groups because of freedom of speech protections. The decision declared that money is speech, and cannot be limited.

As a result, many, maybe most, of the negative ads you saw this past election season were paid for by independent groups funded by anonymous donors, rather than by candidates and political parties. This new phenomenon risks taking campaigns out of the hands of candidates and parties, making them subservient to moneyed interests of the right or left.

At the least, the public deserves to know who is paying for these ads, something that is not required at present.

The democratic process has never been perfect. Few reforms can be expected in Illinois. Maybe that is why the throw-the-bums-out Tea Party activists had such great impact on elections in 2010.