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PROGRAMS Electoral Reform Program

The alienation of American voters is the most striking political phenomenon of our time. In the past several decades, voter turnout has dropped, while the number of independents has grown to equal or surpass the number of Americans who identify with one of the two national parties. If these trends continue, then the very legitimacy of American democracy may come into question.

While voter alienation has many causes, the two most important are the role of money in elections and rules that rig the political system to protect the two major parties from competition. Examining bold and innovative solutions to these design defects in American democracy is the purpose of the New America Foundation's Electoral Reform Program.

Free Air Time

In recent years, much of the attention of political reformers has concentrated on the "supply-side" reform of reducing the role of candidates and corporations in financing political campaigns. While campaign finance reforms like the McCain-Feingold reforms are necessary and important, they may be vulnerable to constitutional challenges and can be too easily circumvented. Campaign finance reform needs to be reinforced—not replaced—by "demand-side" reforms that would reduce the need of candidates to raise vast sums of money from special interest groups and rich individuals in order to get their messages to the voters.

The most promising demand-side reforms are proposals for "free air time." The American public owns the airwaves and grants the use of them to radio and television stations on certain conditions. From the beginning of the broadcast age, radio and television stations have been required to reserve some of their air time for public service broadcasts. Building upon this precedent, radio and television stations should be required to support unpaid political advertising for all candidates on the ballot during political campaigns. The Free Air Time Project of the Electoral Reform Program will examine proposals and proposed legislation designed

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to promote this method of reducing the role of special-interests and wealthy donors in our democracy.

Instant Runoff Voting

America's plurality or "first-past-the-post" electoral system is an undemocratic anachronism that restricts voter choice and protects the two-party cartel in the United States. Plurality voting thwarts the will of the majority, because in a race with three or more candidates with no majority winner, a candidate who is the last choice of most of the voters may win if he or she has slightly more votes than the others. Even worse, under plurality voting third-party and independent candidates tend to act as spoilers—throwing the race to the candidate that their own supporters like the least.

The United States inherited the archaic and primitive plurality voting method from eighteenth-century Britain. Most democracies in the world today use more sophisticated electoral systems that more accurately register the preferences of voters. One system that is particularly suitable to the United States is "instant runoff voting" (IRV). IRV permits voters to rank candidates in order of preference, in a race with three or more candidates. The candidates with the fewest votes are then eliminated, and their votes redistributed to the remaining candidates, until a candidate has a majority of votes. The result is identical to that of a runoff election, without the expense.

IRV has been adopted for city-wide elections in San Francisco. Many states as well as state political parties are debating the adoption of IRV for their own elections. The Instant Runoff Voting Project of the New America Foundation will promote the adoption of IRV for elections in federal as well as state and local elections, in order to provide American voters with what they want: more political choices.