



Midwest reform network paints troubling portrait of Illinois political system

Advocates layout comprehensive blueprint for regaining public trust

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CHICAGO – Leading Midwestern reform groups including the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform (ICPR), today released a new book profiling the condition of democracy in Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan. Not surprisingly, with a recent governor in jail and another administration under a cloud of indictments, Illinois compares poorly to its peers.

The comprehensive examination of the state’s political system also points out that Illinois is the only state in the region without campaign finance limits or restrictions on pay-to-play activities. In addition, Illinois’ 2004 Supreme Court elections in southern Illinois continue to hold the record as the most expensive state court battle in the nation.

Although the general public is growing increasingly impatient with corruption and gridlock, the research illustrates a fundamentally dysfunctional government that continues to obstruct accountability and responsiveness.

The book, “Democratic Renewal: A Call to Action from America’s Heartland,” profiles both pathologies in each of the states, as well as recent reforms. Importantly, the volume offers a prescription for renewed government vigor and accountability for each of the states. The book is being issued under the banner of the recently created Midwest Democracy Network (MDN), a nonpartisan alliance of public interest groups dedicated to strengthening democratic institutions and practices. Kent Redfield, professor of political studies at the University of Illinois at Springfield contributed the introduction and edited the book.

“For too long, Illinois has relied on an excellent US Attorney to ferret out public corruption, rather than attack the hydra at the head by imposing sensible contribution limits and other safeguards to protect against corruption,” said Cynthia Canary, director of ICPR and author of the chapter on Illinois.

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The Illinois story not only recounts the state's recent history of political corruption, but also addresses weak lobbying laws, uncompetitive elections, restrictive ballot access and the concentration of power in the hands of legislative leadership. Despite the many problems Illinois faces, the book also highlights recent victories in the cause of reform, including adoption of the 1998 Gift Ban Act and the 2003 State Ethics law.

The first-of-its-kind analysis recognizes that reform agendas in each state must be unique given political traditions and history. Additionally, the MDN stresses that "nibbling around the edges" of reform will also prove ineffective given the numerous institutional problems plaguing our political systems.

Among the plethora of recommendations suggested for Illinois:

- Adoption of sensible campaign contribution limits;
- More frequent reporting of contributions and expenditures to the State Board of Elections;
- Introduction of a system of voluntary public financing for Supreme and Appellate Court races;
- Outlawing political contributions from those who have or seek contracts from government;
- Requiring elected and appointed officials to file more comprehensive statements of economic interest;
- Strengthen the state's FOIA and Open Meeting Act laws;
- Require a cooling off period before legislators and public employees can become lobbyists; and
- Adopt election day registration provisions.

The MDN, established in late 2006, consists of both state-based reform advocacy organizations and national research and policy institutions. Nearly 30 organizations are affiliated with MDN.

The entire book, "Democratic Renewal: A Call to Action from America's Heartland," along with summaries of the authors' state-specific findings and reform recommendations can be found at www.MidwestDemocracyNetwork.org.

The Illinois Campaign for Political Reform is a founding member of the Midwest Democracy Network. ICPR is a non-partisan public interest group that conducts research and advocates reforms to promote public participation in government, address the role of money in politics and encourage integrity, accountability, and transparency in government.

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