



Wednesday, January 16, 2008
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Health check-up for Midwest democracy

New volume puts Michigan's political shortcomings in a regional context

LANSING – Political reform organizations from five Midwest states have collaborated to publish a new book that assesses the state of democracy in Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota. The volume analyzes political pathologies that are unique to the respective states and those that cut across the Great Lakes region. *Democratic Renewal: A Call to Action from America's Heartland* also proposes reform measures to revitalize democracy in the states.

The book is an important analysis of multiple political systems in a region of the country that is a political bellwether and frequently has a decisive impact on national elections. Edited by Kent Redfield, professor of political science and public policy at the University of Illinois at Springfield, the volume is a publication of the recently organized Midwest Democracy Network (MDN), a nonpartisan alliance of public interest groups that includes the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, the League of Women Voters of Michigan and Common Cause in Michigan.

“This is a critical analysis because the health of our democratic institutions is the foundation on which our public policies are formed,” said Rich Robinson of the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, one of book’s authors. “If we’re dissatisfied with the performance of our state government, we should be very concerned about reforming political practices.”

Key recommendations for Michigan include:

- Limits and greater accountability in state campaign finances.
- More frequent and more thorough disclosure of lobbying activity.
- Personal financial disclosure for elected officials and top administration officials, and a cooling-off period between public service and lobbying.
- A nonpartisan-based system of redistricting.

- A voluntary system of full public funding for appellate judicial election campaigns.
- Eliminating legislative term limits.

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 are available in portable document format at www.MidwestDemocracyNetwork.org. An overview of MDN projects and highlights can be found at the same web address.