



Midwest reform groups examine Ohio's dysfunctional political system

Advocates promote ideas to restore public trust

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 14, 2008

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COLUMBUS – A new book released today by leading Midwest reform groups, including Ohio Citizen Action, concludes that the foundation of Ohio's political system is severely fractured. In particular, the analysis states that Ohio's election administration system is seriously lagging behind, while its campaign finance laws are in a race to the bottom with those in Illinois.

The comprehensive examination of the state's political system also highlights serious flaws related to government ethics, redistricting and judicial elections, all of which are inhibiting government from making progress on the state's most pressing issues. In response to the analysis, the book also lays out a roadmap to stability that stresses a comprehensive approach that doesn't "nibble around the edges" of reform.

"Democratic Renewal: A Call to Action from America's Heartland" assesses how the individual political systems in Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin are performing. The book also documents reform efforts that are underway in each state and provides five separate reform agendas designed to reestablish government accountability and responsiveness. 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.

In conjunction with the release of "Democratic Renewal," the MDN also launched a web site (www.MidwestDemocracyNetwork.org) to serve as a clearinghouse of political reform ideas and projects, policy research and news.

"Although the public is well aware of high-profile examples of government corruption and mismanagement, there are a set of interconnected issues that foster our dysfunctional political environment," said Catherine Turcer, campaign finance director for Ohio Citizen Action and principle author of the Ohio chapter. "This book provides a groundbreaking assessment of our system and prescribes possible solutions."

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“Democratic Renewal” chronicles Ohio’s recent political history and points to the strains that have led to lack of public confidence in state government. In addition, the authors highlight an ever-growing desire for reform and acknowledge that elected officials have recently heard the call. Unfortunately, recent attempts to address several reform issues have fallen short or actually exacerbated the existing problems. For example, the Ohio Legislature tackled the campaign finance system in 2004 by quadrupling contribution limits to more than \$10,000 and permitting direct corporate contributions to the political parties for the first time. In 2006, when the General Assembly attempted to reign in "pay-to-play" practices, they failed to create an enforceable law and attached a poison pill making it ripe for litigation. Similarly, when the Legislature attempted to address problems associated with the 2004 election, they created new problems by instituting voter identification requirements.

“It is clear that Ohio must do better,” Turcer added. “While other states move forward on reform, we stand pat or move backwards. There is no shortage of good and sensible ideas for addressing our state’s problems. The only thing in short supply is the bipartisan leadership needed to rescue and reinforce our state’s democratic institutions.”

Reform suggestions for Ohio in “Democratic Renewal” include:

- The creation of an independent redistricting commission
- Amending state law to remove unnecessary barriers to voter registration and participation
- An overhaul of campaign contribution limits
- Enhanced disclosure and enforcement of the activities of registered lobbyists
- Adoption of a voluntary public financing for judicial elections
- Improved access to public records

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. An overview of MDN projects and highlights can be found at www.MidwestDemocracyNetwork.org.

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 also be found at www.MidwestDemocracyNetwork.org.

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