



a journal of positive futures

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## **YES! #27, fall 2003**

### **Government of the people ... shall not perish**

*YES! Discussion Guides are designed to help you explore your own experiences, opinions, and commitments as they relate to material found in YES! magazine. Use them in group discussions, classrooms, or study circles. We believe that when people discuss with mutual respect and caring the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change.*

*You can find the articles mentioned below on our website at [www.yesmagazine.org](http://www.yesmagazine.org). You are welcome to download and photocopy them free of charge. If you'd like to purchase multiple copies of YES! or subscriptions for your class or group, please phone 800/937-4451 and ask for the Discussion Group Discount.*

**THE SPIRALING COSTS OF CAMPAIGNS**, the erosion of liberties since September 11, the increasing corporate control of the media and shrinking diversity of voices heard in those media, ominous developments in the mechanisms of voting all threaten the notion that United States is a government “of by and for the people,” in Lincoln’s phrase. But around the country people are energized to bring about “a new birth of freedom” (Lincoln again). Organizations and movements are springing up to prepare for the 2004 elections, reconceiving electoral politics not as a narrow effort to bet on a winning horse in the races, but as part of movements to gain and transform political power. The articles in this issue ask not whether people can reclaim their government, but how we’re going to do it.

This discussion guide centers on the following articles. You might want to discuss a different one at each session.

- William Wimsatt, “Young, Righteous—and Voting”
- Micah Sifry, “Clean Elections—Making a Difference”
- Greg Palast and Ina Howard, “Visualize a Fair Election”
- Kim, Camenzind, McConnell, and Richie, “Tools for Political Change”
- Jonathan Rowe, “Don’t Talk Like a Twit”

#### **Young, righteous—and voting**

Activist William Wimsatt worked for Rock the Vote, yet he didn’t bother to vote. Then, last November, Wimsatt had a revelation—electoral politics could be made fun and powerful. He started talking about tapping into the outrage of young voters, and got a tremendous response. “I’ve never felt so invigorated in my life,” he says.

- Do you vote? Why or why not?
- Have you ever been involved in an electoral campaign? What motivated you to get involved?
- Wimsatt says that many people find ballots confusing and information on how to vote hard to come by. Have you found this to be the case?
- Do you sometimes feel unclear about the issues or overwhelmed by the task of getting informed?
- How do you get information on candidates and ballot measures? What sources, such as guides in local papers, have been most useful to you?



- Why would young people think voting is uncool or irrelevant? Are they wrong to feel this way?
- How might you take action based on your experience that could help other people, including youth, feel informed and empowered enough to vote?

### **Clean elections—making a difference**

It costs so much money to run for office in the U.S. that elected officials are beholden to the people, companies, and industries that give them the most money. This has blocked reform on such issues as healthcare and environmental protection, because they threaten the interests of those with enough money to have a substantial influence on the outcomes of elections. Micah Sifry describes how, in Maine, a broad coalition made campaign reform happen, drawing in a broad array of organizations and activists across the political spectrum.

- What issues are you most concerned about that have not been tackled by your elected officials? What roles do campaign money and the opposition of wealthy interests play in these failures?
- Have there been efforts at campaign finance reform in your state? How have they fared? How might the lessons of Maine apply to your area?
- A number of court decisions have ruled that limits on the amount of money a candidate can spend and how much an individual can donate to a campaign are unconstitutional limits on free speech, and the American Civil Liberties Union opposes, on these grounds, these of funding limits. Do you agree with this reasoning?
- Maine and Arizona adopted public financing of the campaigns of candidates who agree to restrict the amount of money and the size of donations they accept. Do you think the public should finance campaigns? Much of the money candidates raise goes to buying ads on radio and television, so Senator John McCain has backed requirements that radio and television give free air time to candidates. Which of these measures do you think are most effective? What difficulties or limitations do you see them having?

### **Visualize a fair election**

Greg Palast uncovered a morass of problems in the 2000 presidential election in Florida that resulted in the disenfranchisement of thousands of voters—especially African-Americans. The Help America Vote Act (HAVA), passed to deal with the 2000 election problems, requires the entire nation to use the kind of scrub lists that were used so badly in Florida. Meanwhile, in accordance with HAVA, computers that provide no paper trail are set to be installed throughout the nation.

- What was your reaction on reading Palast and Howard's article? How important is the issue of voting mechanics to the functioning of democracy?
- Have there been any oddities like those described by Palast and Howard in your state or community? What community discussions have there been about the issue or about voting procedures? Are there any opportunities for public input on voting methods?
- Does your locality use electronic voting machines? Do the machines provide any paper trail for verifying the votes? What are the recount procedures? What companies provide the voting machines?
- Palast and Howard say that citizen activism can take back our elections. Are there any organizations working on voting issues in your area?

### **Tools for political change**

Many creative new tactics are being devised and old ones put to new effect today. Here are a few: Teach-ins, state and local political councils that recruit progressive candidates and help them get elected, a “solidarity pledge,” and updated voting rules.

- How might one of these strategies bring change on an issue you care about? How might you take action?
- What other strategies can you think of that have been effective and might be promising in helping ordinary people transform our political system?



### Don't talk like a twit

Jonathan Rowe argues that conservatives have succeeded in speaking effectively to Americans' moral framework and are thus winning with positions that may actually be unpopular. He makes the distinction between communicating to people we're trying to reach and just expressing ourselves.

- Rowe gives a number of examples of poor communication of progressive positions, from the wimpy Democratic criticism of Bush's "Bring 'em on" comment, to Democratic labelling of the Bush tax cuts as "risky," to the heavy use of nurturing, Mother Earth language in arguments in favor of environmental protections. What do you think of these examples? Can you think of other arguments in which one side was effectively communicated, the other ineffectively? What made them so?
- Rowe offers ways of recasting these arguments. Can you suggest other issues that could be similarly reframed so as to speak more effectively to the majority?
- Think about relatives, colleagues, or neighbors who have a very different perspective on issues you care about. What is the foundation for their deeply held views? Are there values you hold in common? Do these suggest issues on which you might find common ground? What language might help find that common ground?

### What are you doing?

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