



Committed to strengthening democratic institutions
IN ILLINOIS | MICHIGAN | MINNESOTA | OHIO | WISCONSIN

March 31, 2009

The Honorable Barack H. Obama
The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Congratulations on becoming the 44th President of the United States of America. We, as members of the Midwest Democracy Network, write to express our collective sense of optimism and enthusiasm over what we regard as the best chance to fundamentally change our political system in at least 30 years and to challenge you to make the most of this opportunity.

Your message of hope has inspired millions and we look forward to working with you to break the grip that lobbyists on K Street have on our nation's capital and wealthy campaign donors have on our elected representatives. We believe the American people chose you to lead our great nation in these troubled times because you best embody the belief that Washington can be transformed and that the many crises facing our nation—the collapsing economy and financial meltdown, the broken health care system, and global climate change, to name just a few—can be tackled in a way that serves the public interest and promotes the common good.

The Midwest Democracy Network (www.midwestdemocracynetwork.org) is a nonpartisan alliance of more than 20 civic and public interest groups from Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. The Network also includes prominent academic institutions and respected national policy and legal experts who partner with the state-based organizations in projects aimed at improving democratic institutions in the five-state region.

From our vantage point in America's heartland, we strongly believe the two most important steps that can be taken to reform Washington are for Congress to pass and you to sign the **Fair Elections Now Act** reforming congressional elections, introduced by your friend, colleague and fellow Illinoisan, Senator Dick Durbin, along with Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, as well as the **Presidential Funding Act** overhauling the antiquated presidential public financing system, sponsored by Senators Russ Feingold of Wisconsin and Susan Collins of Maine.

When you served in the U.S. Senate you were a co-sponsor of both the Fair Elections Now Act and the Presidential Funding Act. In response to the Midwest Democracy Network's questionnaire on political reform sent to all presidential candidates and made public in late November 2007, you expressed your strong support for both a voluntary public financing system for congressional elections and a revitalized public financing system for presidential campaigns.

We now look to you to use the full powers of the White House to make these much-needed reforms a reality. The Fair Elections Now Act would go a long way toward ending the pay-to-play political system that dominates our political process. By giving candidates for Congress an opportunity to seek office without having to rely on those who can afford to write or bundle \$2,300 campaign contributions, the Fair Elections Now Act supercharges small dollar contributions, and in turn, empowers millions of Americans, regardless of socioeconomic status, to participate in our democracy in a meaningful way.

Similarly, the Feingold-Collins reform plan revamps the presidential public financing system and fixes what is now an ineffective program. By increasing the matching funds for presidential candidates and removing the state-by-state spending limits, their proposal addresses the shortcomings of the current law.

Politics today has become an arms race for campaign cash. Politicians spend too much time fundraising when that time could be spent focusing on pressing problems that affect all of us. We ask that you make these common sense bills a priority early in your administration and make our elections about voters and volunteers instead of big money donors.

Addressing the public's disgust with the way politics has been practiced in Washington for too long is central to the task of gaining the citizenry's trust and restoring confidence in the federal government's capacity to tackle the enormous problems facing our country.

The absence of effective regulation and oversight played a major role in the massive financial crisis that threatens our nation's economy and security. It is not lost on the average citizen that the finance industry along with real estate and insurance interests have made more than \$2 billion in campaign contributions to candidates for federal office. And it is hardly considered a coincidence that those most responsible for the collapse of our economy were never reined in by the recipients of all those donations, and then were quickly bailed out when things fell apart.

The pivotal role that these massive campaign contributions played in creating the national financial crisis represents just one more example of the enormous costs to citizens and taxpayers that come from federal candidates being dependent on special interest groups, lobbyists, bundlers and big campaign donors.

Our organizations call on you to work with members of Congress to end politics as usual and take action to fundamentally reform our nation's campaign finance laws.

With hope for change,

Cynthia Canary, Executive Director
Illinois Campaign for Political Reform

Rich Robinson, Executive Director
Michigan Campaign Finance Network

Dan McGrath, Executive Director
TakeAction Minnesota

Catherine Turcer, Legislative Director
Ohio Citizen Action

Mike McCabe, Executive Director
Wisconsin Democracy Campaign

Malcolm C. Rich, Executive Director
Chicago Appleseed Fund for Justice

Todd Dietterle
Common Cause Illinois

Brian Imus, State Director
Illinois PIRG

Kent Redfield, Director
Sunshine Project, University of Illinois at Springfield

Jessica Reiser, President
League of Women Voters of Michigan

Allison Cairo
PIRGIM

Tom Vellenga, President
Heartland Democracy

Marcia Avner, Public Policy Director
Minnesota Council of Nonprofits

Linda D. Lalley, President
LWV-Ohio

Jay Heck, Executive Director
Common Cause Wisconsin

Paula Lawson, President
League of Women Voters of Illinois

Frank Houston, Executive Director
Common Cause of Michigan

Tierney Eaton, Coordinator
Michigan Election Coalition

Mike Dean, Executive Director
Common Cause Minnesota

Keesha Gaskins, Executive Director
League of Women Voters of Minnesota

William K. Woods, Governing Board Chair
Common Cause/Ohio

Josa-Marie Cowell
Ohio PIRG

Bruce Speight, Advocate
WISPIRG

cc: **Bill Co-Sponsors**
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Sen. Russ Feingold
Rep. John B. Larsen

Sen. Arlen Specter
Sen. Susan Collins
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