

Oregon Democrats, GOP join forces against independent candidates

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The Socialist Equality Party's statement outlining the program on which it will run candidates in this year's mid-term elections, "For a socialist alternative in the 2006 US elections", included a crucial observation about the obstacles we face in this campaign:

"The American political system is profoundly undemocratic. The two-party system perpetuates itself by seeking to exclude from the ballot all independent alternatives, especially those on the left. It does so through of a welter of election laws that impose arbitrary and prohibitive signature requirements for independent and third-party candidates, deadlines for filing nominating petitions that are designed to block rather than facilitate ballot access, and a corporate-controlled media that systematically excludes critical viewpoints—especially those of socialists."

It is worth recalling this observation and, with it in mind, turning to the state of Oregon in the Pacific Northwestern region of the United States.

The state's largest daily newspaper, the *Oregonian*, reported January 23 on a "new, barely noticed law" that took effect recently. The law quietly emerged, in embryonic form, as a bill during the opening weeks of the 2005 state legislative session. House Bill 2614 was introduced by two sponsoring lawmakers: Rep. Mary Nolan, a Portland Democrat, and a Republican, Rep. Derrick Kitts, the majority whip in the Oregon House.

Noting that the law might spell "extinction" for independent candidates, the newspaper went on to describe the law.

Prior to the law, any registered Oregon voter could sign a nominating petition for an independent candidate, or attend a nominating convention. The law changes that. Now, any voter who casts a ballot in a primary election cannot help nominate an independent candidate to the ballot. Typically, this is done by the candidate and his or her supporters collecting a requisite number of signatures

on petitions.

Also, the law prohibits voters from signing a petition for more than one candidate.

The origins of the law are obvious. In 2004, Ralph Nader attempted to get on Oregon's ballot as an independent candidate for president. Conservative groups were quick to urge their own supporters to sign Nader's nominating petitions. They assumed that in a close race, the liberal consumer advocate would draw votes away from Democrat John Kerry. Presidential elections in Oregon have been close before, so the scenario envisioned and desired by conservatives was a distinct possibility.

The Democrats waged a reactionary campaign of sabotage against Nader in 2004, with the hotly contested state of Oregon, with its seven electoral votes, being one of the states where they launched legal and administrative challenges against Nader's candidacy. In the end, they succeeded in this antidemocratic campaign in Oregon.

The *Oregonian* reported that state lawmakers saw that episode as "an opening to ratchet down what they saw as a free-for-all nominating procedure." With bipartisan support in both chambers of the 90-member legislative body, the bill was easily approved, and the state's Democratic governor, Ted Kulongoski, signed it into law on July 21, 2005. And the public was told about it, finally, on January 23—nearly a year after Kitts and Nolan introduced it.

It is hardly a surprise that lawmakers didn't exactly stumble over themselves to alert the public to what they were doing. This reactionary attack on democratic rights adds an even greater burden to the already onerous requirements on people who seek to oppose, at the ballot box, the official two-party system.

But what are we to make of the *Oregonian*? Seeking an answer, one of our supporters on Monday called Harry Esteve, the reporter whose front-page article finally let voters in on the secret more than six months after

Kulongoski signed it. Esteve replied that House Bill 2614 “kind of snuck up on us.” That isn’t exactly true.

The bill was introduced by Kitts and Nolan on February 22. Public hearings were held on March 15 and 18. For the latter, the paper noted in a calendar listing only that the House Elections and Rules Committee would meet that afternoon, but it did not mention the bill. On May 5, the legislation emerged during a work session. Only a short calendar entry—printed in small type and buried deep in the newspaper—noted the time and place. It did not mention the legislation.

On June 14, House Bill 2614 finally appeared in the *Oregonian*—in tiny type, on page 7 of an inside section of the newspaper. A legislative calendar listing noted that the Senate Rules Committee would consider a bill that “prohibits an elector from participating in more than one nominating process for each partisan public office to be filed at a general election.” The hearing would convene at 8:30 *that morning*.

The “political notebook” that day, which included the calendar item, was written by Jeff Mapes. He is the *Oregonian’s* veteran political affairs reporter. House Bill 2614 did not “sneak up” on the newspaper, as claimed by Esteve. Even if the *Oregonian* somehow failed to notice the legislation for four months, reporters obviously knew about it by the middle of June—two weeks before lawmakers voted.

With virtually no one paying any attention to this antidemocratic legislation, the bill passed the Senate 17-12 on July 29, with 15 of the “yes” votes cast by Democrats. The House voted the next day, with 17 Democrats joining the Republicans to approve the bill 39-7. Thirteen other members were absent or excused.

It is significant that lawmakers who voted “no” apparently did not feel compelled, at any point during the bill’s 143-day life in the Oregon legislature, to call public attention to it.

One source of this attack on democratic rights is the narrowing base of support for the Democratic and Republican parties. In Oregon, as in the rest of the nation, new voters are as likely to declare themselves “non-affiliated” as they are to register as a Democrat or Republican.

As the 2004 presidential election approached, both parties in Oregon launched voter registration drives. Though each party was able to swell its ranks, neither side could increase its share of registered voters. Democratic voters comprised 39 percent of all registered voters during the 2000 and 2004 elections, while Republicans continued

to claim 36 percent in 2004, just as they did in 2000. A quarter of Oregon’s 2.1 million voters are either nonaffiliated, “independent” or aligned with other parties—a direct expression of the two-party system’s inability to speak to the needs of working people.

At *BlueOregon.com*, a web site featuring news and discussion by Oregon Democrats, Portland attorney Dan Meek, a public power advocate with experience in the state’s elections process, wrote that the new law effectively amounts to a fourfold increase in the number of signatures required to qualify a candidate for the ballot.

Meek also cited a new administrative rule enforced by the Oregon Elections Division that requires such parties to report the names and addresses of any person who attends a nominating convention.

“Everyone who attends is deemed to have participated in the nominating process for all offices, whether or not the minor party nominates anyone for that office and whether or not the person participates in the nomination of anyone for any office,” he wrote. Calling it an “intrusion into the affairs of minor parties,” Meek observed that the *Oregonian* did not mention this new rule in its coverage of House Bill 2614.

The Democratic Party’s historical role in rebuffing any political challenge to the capitalist status quo is well documented. The Bush administration’s near hysterical commendation of those who stray off the beaten path of so-called “responsible” political debate is simply the flip side of the same coin. Nader is no socialist. He obviously is distressed by the capitalist system’s worst excesses and wishes to mitigate them in various ways, but firmly within the framework of a system that is rooted in exploitation.

In the prevailing climate of political reaction, however, the Democratic Party cannot tolerate even this small measure of dissent. In this way, as in many others, the two main parties are substantively the same.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes this effort to disenfranchise those who wish to hear from and vote for candidates of their choice and calls on its supporters to assist us in our efforts to place candidates on the ballot—in Oregon, and around the nation.



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