

Testimony of Steven Welzer to the NJ Electoral Law Enforcement Commission March 18, 2014

I was the gubernatorial candidate of the Green Party of New Jersey last year. You might be aware that there are Green parties in every advanced democracy and in almost 100 countries worldwide. Ecology is a major issue of our times and the project that we refer to as the "greening of society" has enormous resonance, so the Green parties are steadily growing. In countries with proportional representation systems the Greens regularly poll five, ten, or fifteen percent of the vote and thereby secure five, ten, or fifteen percent of representation in legislatures. Under those circumstances our message gets heard and our performance in lower office merits consideration for higher office.

But even in many countries that don't enjoy a proportional representation system the Greens are able to make some headway owing to electoral laws that encourage participation by minor parties. For example: Canada uses a winner-take-all system like the United States does. If the Green Party garners 5% nationally but no Green candidate wins a race, then the Greens get no seats in the parliament. That's how it works in the United States and that makes it hard in both countries to build up a minor party. But Canada has much more progressive election laws in terms of public funding. If a minor party can get a foothold of two percent support, it can become eligible for three types of public financing: 1) subsidies proportional to how many votes it receives; 2) tax credits subsidizing political contributions by its supporters; and 3) electoral expense reimbursements allocated according to party spending during election periods.

For decades the Green parties of the U.S. and Canada both struggled at the margins. But once the Canadian Greens managed to qualify for public funding they were able to leap forward such that they now have two Members of Parliament and much wider recognition than do the Greens in this country. The amount of money raised privately by the federal and local Green parties in both countries is similar and it's not much more than \$500,000 in any given year. But in 2008, the last year for which I have data, the Canadian Greens received a per-vote subsidy of \$2M, contribution subsidies of \$1M, and \$1.5M in electoral expense reimbursements. So they wound up with over \$5M to spend overall, about ten times what the state and national Green parties in the U.S. had available to spend.

This shows how crucial public finance laws and programs can be for minor parties. The intention of New Jersey's gubernatorial public financing program is to help in that regard and the Green Party appreciates that this is a step in the right direction. We believe that the threshold for qualification is too high. There have been a number of independent candidates of a certain type who have been able to meet the criteria: Chris Daggett in 2009 and Hector Castillo in 2005, for example, were independents who had split off from a major party and thus had a relatively broad base from which to garner contributions. But in all the years since the program was initiated in 1981 I believe that only one *third party* candidate has ever met the criteria. That was Murray Sabrin of the Libertarian Party in 1997.

That also means that, in thirty years, just one third-party candidate has been able to appear in the televised debates. Those debates are likely the single most important arena for campaign exposure.

To sum up: The Green Party urges bold and comprehensive initiatives of all kinds for opening up the electoral system to more voices and more choices. Rather than a winner-take-all system we'd like to see the implementation of Instant Runoff Voting and, beyond that, a transition toward proportional representation. In regard to the gubernatorial public financing program, specifically, we urge that the qualification thresholds be lowered to the point where minor parties can more often attain them.

But if only one incremental change can be given priority at this time, we would encourage reconsideration of the criteria for inclusion in the televised debates. Surely the voters would benefit from being presented with more points of view. It was a step forward when New Jersey started to allow voters to register with minor parties 14 years ago. We suggest that if a party can achieve a threshold of 10,000 registrants its gubernatorial candidate ought to be allowed to participate in the debates.