

ADVANCING DEMOCRACY

THE 2000 ELECTION POSED some profound dilemmas for American democracy. For OSI's U.S. Programs it also marked the first shift in a presidential administration since our launch five years ago. The Clinton administration's criminal justice and welfare reform policies, among others, were not, by any means, wholly consonant with open society values. But in a number of other areas of concern to OSI—including reproductive health and choice, access to legal services for the poor, and media policy reform—the administration made valuable strides. The political climate surrounding those issues is now changing for the worse.

The issues brought into sharp focus by the election and its aftermath underscore the prescience of many of OSI's 1996 program decisions. Long before the political sands shifted, OSI supported a major campaign to protect the independence of the judiciary from the political attacks that have been leveled against judges and judicial nominees in recent years. The baseless charges against Judge Ronnie White during the confirmation hearings for Attorney General John Ashcroft demonstrate the relevance of the issue. And another important question continues to resonate long after the elections and confirmations: what does independence of the judiciary mean when the Supreme Court itself has sorely tested the public's faith that its rulings are based on principle and not on politics?

OSI has worked to increase public confidence in democratic institutions with a significant grantmaking program designed to advance democracy through campaign finance reform and other measures that increase political participation and assure that all people are represented. The McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform was the first major legislative initiative taken up by the new Congress, which suggests the issue has built significant momentum over the last several years.

Yet there are other critical barriers to electoral democracy that must be overcome. The facts about the Florida vote, and what they suggest about voting practices across the country, make it clear that too many citizens—particularly African-Americans—still face obstacles to voter participation.

Antiquated and malfunctioning ballot practices were disproportionately found in Florida counties with large African-American populations. As many as a third of Florida's African-American males of voting age are permanently barred from voting as a result of their criminal records—a nationwide phenomenon first brought to public attention a few years ago by a Human Rights Watch/Sentencing Project report funded by OSI. The disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of citizens who have paid their debt to

IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

society is just one particularly dramatic manifestation of the human and social crisis of our nation's appalling level of incarceration—at two million and counting, the highest in the world. OSI's response to this crisis has been the Center on Crime, Communities & Culture's new three-year initiative to address the overuse of incarceration.

Another issue highlighted by the presidential campaign (and among the key priorities of President Bush), is the improvement of schools serving low-income minority youth. OSI's earliest initiatives in this area included a three-year, multimillion-dollar grant to the Algebra Project, and a five-year, \$125 million grant to The After-School Corporation, which is working with public and private funders and community-based organizations to increase access to after-school programs in New York City. In 2000, OSI, the Carnegie Corporation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation launched a five-year effort to reform and restructure New York City public high schools. OSI's Baltimore office is supporting similar efforts in that city.

As part of our goal to improve education, OSI is also committed to the belief that young people's perspectives are desperately needed in the discussion of public policies affecting them. Building on the success of our Urban Debate Program, which operates in 13 cities, OSI launched a Youth Media Initiative in 2000. It supports magazines, radio programs, websites, documentaries, and other communications projects that provide outlets for the voices of youth, allowing them to be heard on issues from school reform to criminal justice.

In addition, 2000 saw the creation of a new communications department to concentrate on promoting discussion and debate about open society challenges, and to assist grantees in building their communications and advocacy strategies. The work of the department includes media outreach, coordination of public education campaigns, and the creation of print and web-based materials to advance OSI's mission.

American Civil Liberties Union founder Roger Baldwin was fond of saying that democracy is "like living on a raft—you never sink, but your feet are always wet." The extraordinary array of initiatives described in the pages ahead, from debate programs for the poorest schools in 13 cities to grassroots organizing campaigns in the states of the former Confederacy, are the best hope we have that democracy stays afloat in the rough waters ahead.

Gara LaMarche
Director of U.S. Programs