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Ralph Nader's

*A Guide to*

**PRACTICING**

*Student Action*

**DEMOCRACY**

KATHERINE ISAAC

1997

★ RALPH NADER'S ★

# PRACTICING DEMOCRACY 1997

*A Guide to Student Action*

★ KATHERINE ISAAC ★

*The Center for the Study of Responsive Law*



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## PREFACE

*Practicing Democracy 1997* is built on the premise that a healthy democracy requires not only the *right* to participate in the political system but that its citizens constantly exercise and expand those rights and opportunities. This exercise of democracy involves far more than voting, paying taxes, and serving on jury duty; rather, it requires that citizens daily engage in debate, weigh alternatives, and negotiate conflict and controversy to safeguard and expand democracy's rights and freedoms. The grand movements against slavery and for civil rights and workers' rights testify to the power of citizen participation throughout U.S. history. Citizens today, such as those working to halt the consequences of toxic pollution on human health and the environment, continue these traditions by working for a more just society.

*Practicing Democracy 1997* offers students an updated overview of the tools and techniques available to citizens wishing to engage in the democratic process. These techniques, including lobbying legislation, waging strikes for workplace rights, and conducting demonstrations and boycotts against unfair corporate practices, are the vehicles through which citizens, as individuals or in groups, can make their voices heard.

The essays by Senator Paul Wellstone, former Republican National Committee chairperson Richard Bond, and consumer advocate Ralph Nader offer students three very different perspectives on what it means to become involved in the political process. Wellstone shares his journey from political science professor to U.S. senator via his unique electoral campaign that incorporated his experience as a grassroots organizer; Richard Bond offers insight into his participation in electoral politics; and Ralph Nader shows how students as a class have a unique opportunity to make a significant impact on society.

Whatever the issues or causes that students favor, this book aims to leave them with both the inspiration and the skills to practice democracy.

# FOREWORD

## On the Importance of Citizen Activism

*By U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone (D. Minn.);  
former professor of political science at Carleton College*

### BACKGROUND: MY JOURNEY FROM THE CAMPUS TO THE U.S. SENATE

For more than twenty years as a college political science teacher, I emphasized the centrality of citizen activism. The core principle I imparted was that full participation in our democracy is an essential aspect of citizenship and is crucial for the success of our democracy.

As the son of a Russian Jewish immigrant who fled persecution, it is not surprising that my core ethic is a commitment to participatory democracy—a commitment to improve the lives of people.

My teaching methodology flowed from this commitment to social responsibility. Instead of requiring rote learning, I urged my students to locate themselves personally in relation to the important issues we were studying. Instead of asking students, “What did the book say?” I asked, “What did the book mean to you?”

By teaching with this commitment to social responsibility and action, my purpose was to lead my students toward analysis, understanding, and personal application. In short, I taught my students to develop the conceptual tools necessary to understand our very complicated world. From this understanding, I wanted my students to evaluate different courses of action available for social change. And after evaluating a variety of courses of action, I hoped they would commit themselves to action based on powerfully held beliefs. The ethic was and is that we all must work for what we believe in—or, as I told my students, we cannot separate the lives we live from the words we speak.

I applied the same standard to myself. I came from North Carolina, where I witnessed how the civil rights movement was able to change the United States for the better. With this formative experience, I could not be a dispassionate researcher, writer, or teacher. Instead, for twenty years I taught, wrote, and participated in community organizing.

By the late 1980s, I found myself in strong disagreement with the policies of Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. I believed that they were reversing fifty years of social policy and hard-won battles for social justice and economic fairness. I also was increasingly indignant at the timidity of the Democrats. Rather than standing up as a clear voice for justice and economic empowerment, too many

Democrats were becoming adjunct members of the Republican party. Following the standards laid out for my students, I decided that the only credible course of action open to me was to become involved in electoral politics.

## RACE FOR THE U.S. SENATE

To the surprise of most, I was the only challenger in 1990 to defeat an incumbent senator. I believe there are three reasons why we won:

1. *Progressive issues:* My campaign was unabashedly progressive on the issues while being populist in style. People in Minnesota had no doubts about where I stood on the defining issues of our day: choice, civil rights, economic empowerment, jobs, health-care reform, educational excellence, and environmental priorities. People also knew that my populist tradition grew out of their tradition—I traveled the state in a green school bus, stopping in cafés to listen to the stories of working men and women, trying to understand their needs and dreams.
2. *Creative TV ads:* With so little money, we could not wage a normal television campaign. While our opponent outspent us seven to one, we countered with funny, creative ads that were developed by one of my former students. Instead of resorting to attack ads to tarnish and enrage, our ads managed to get people to smile about politics—a victory in itself.
3. *Effective volunteers and get-out-the-vote calls:* Most important, my campaign effectively merged grassroots and community organizing by exciting and empowering thousands of individuals from around the state. No one—no political pundit or analyst—anticipated the power of active citizens coming together throughout the campaign. No one anticipated the effect volunteers would have during the last days of the campaign. In the final four days, untold numbers of volunteers made 700,000 get-out-the-vote calls. In the end, all the house parties, the café and school stops, and the commitment to make a difference came together—and we won.

To keep that stirring example of citizen involvement alive, key supporters and democratic activists have formed the Wellstone Alliance to ensure that the 1990 victory was not the victory of just one person. Through the Alliance, we can transfer the skills we learned, we can train campaign managers, and we can encourage and support people to run for political office on all levels, from the local school board and city council to the U.S. Senate.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As I look at the decade of the 90s, I am convinced that citizen action and social change will be the decade's defining politics. I believe that there will be three critical ingredients: programs, organizing, and electoral campaigns.

1. We must develop programs and policies because without them we would be a movement without direction. The programs that we articulate and defend should be credible alternatives to the retrograde policies of the 1980s. Indeed, it is incumbent on us to advocate particular policy alternatives that speak directly to people's lives, lest we be intellectually dishonest by simply opposing and criticizing other programs.
2. We must continue our extensive organizing. Programs and policy alternatives are not enough. Without grassroots organizing, we will have a program without a constituency. It is the people at the grassroots level who fight for changes that are important to all of us.
3. Finally, we will continue encouraging people to run for elective office because electoral politics is the main way we contest for power in our country.

## CONCLUSION: CITIZEN ACTIVISM AND THE POLITICS OF ANGER

We are living through a volatile, turbulent time in our political history. Indeed, the politics of anger has become a central dynamic in our political discussion.

This anger can take several paths. The citizenry could become more disengaged and more cynical, joining in an across-the-board bashing of politicians and the political process and further denigrating the notion of public service. If this is the path people take, it will only lead to a further decline in our democracy.

Even worse, this politics of anger could spiral down to become fertile ground for the politics of hatred. During hard economic times, without empowering solutions, explanations, and positive citizen action, people's anger can easily be manipulated by demagogues and hatemongers.

However, that same anger could cause people to become more engaged and energized. People could decide that the only way something good in politics will be accomplished is if they take control and become their own leaders. If the anger causes more engagement and accountability, then our country is on the threshold of a new era of citizen participation, and we will witness a rebirth of democracy.

What will happen depends on whether we fulfill the promise of citizen action, which is premised on the belief that each person can be a leader in his or her community.

And that's where students come in. This book is important because it presents you with an opportunity to become politically active. It allows you to develop your analytical abilities and affords you a chance to see where your talents can contribute to social change. It offers you the same challenge of political involvement that I sought for my students.

In closing, I would like to say a word about Ralph Nader. For years, Ralph Nader and his organization Public Citizen have been presenting opportunities for citizens to develop their skills and become involved in improving people's lives. He and his organization have been developing policy alternatives and have been at the forefront of social activism and change. Few have done more to merge grassroots activism, policy alternatives, and electoral involvement than he. I'm honored to be writing this foreword at his invitation.



# FOREWORD

## My Entry into Politics

*By Richard N. Bond, former Chairman,  
Republican National Committee*

My fascination with politics began when I was ten years old. My parents permitted me to stay up late and watch the 1960 Republican and Democratic presidential nominating conventions. Later that year, on a blustery fall afternoon, I stood for hours to catch a glimpse of John Kennedy as his motorcade passed slowly through my hometown on Long Island.

More than thirty years later I realized one of my life's ambitions and stood before a national audience and gavelled open the Republican National Convention as chairman of the Republican party. Over the twelve years of the Reagan and Bush presidencies, I rode in numerous motorcades and watched people straining to glimpse their nation's leader—much as I had done as a boy.

Politics is a unique profession. It can be uplifting and fulfilling, while at the same time, disappointing and disheartening. Some might say that, at its simplest, politics is about winning and losing. However, that is only part of the story. Every year thousands of men and women enter politics. The reasons why they run for office or work in campaigns are as different as the positions for which they compete.

As a child, I was first drawn to the excitement and the spectacle of politics. However, as I got older, I was motivated by more serious purposes. Government is the primary agent of change in America. "Having a voice" in government is important to most people. Peaceful change through the political process has brought free speech to millions of people in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Unfortunately, many Americans sometimes take their First Amendment right for granted. Involvement in politics gives your voice weight and influence on issues that you care about—from education and the environment to the economy and foreign affairs. Participation in campaigns, politics, and, ultimately, government, gives you a say in your own personal future and in the future of your friends, family, neighborhood, and nation.

My major attraction in politics has been to campaigns and the Republican party. In high school I rang doorbells and put up yard signs for local candidates. In college I debated the issue of the Vietnam War and went door to door for Mayor John Lindsay of New York City. After graduation, I worked in the Nassau County government, and I met George Bush, who was then the Republican party's national chairman.

At the time, Mr. Bush was speaking at our annual fund-raiser. The Watergate scandal, which ultimately ended the presidency of Richard Nixon, was in full force. Millions of voters felt let down by Nixon and alienated from the Republican party. Bush had the difficult job of defending the president while distancing the Republican party from a scandal in which it had no part. His forceful performance on behalf of President Nixon and his broader message about Republican principles made a lasting impression. He presented the Republican party as a worthy cause, dedicated to the proposition that the government that governs least governs best. I saw a disconnection between national leaders who governed without regard for fiscal responsibility and the taxpayers who provided the tax revenues. I saw a lack of accountability and wanted to help change the system and make leaders more responsive to citizens.

I left my job in county government and began to work on political campaigns—as a state representative, a county executive, and then a lieutenant governor. For almost two decades, I held a series of related jobs: campaign manager, field operative for the Republican National Committee, congressional press secretary, presidential campaign political director, and White House aide. Then, nineteen years from the time that I first met George Bush, I succeeded him as chairman of the Republican National Committee.

As party leader, I found echoes of what I had encountered a decade and a half earlier. Ironically, it was now President Bush who needed a strong defense from a Republican party chairman. His popularity had plummeted, the media were hostile, and Democrats (including Bill Clinton) were lined up to run against him. He was even facing a primary challenge from within his own party, as Republicans felt let down by Bush's economic policies and were drifting away from his banner. So it happened that I was to defend the former party chairman who had, in his own defense of a beleaguered president, inspired me to pursue a career in politics.

Even though Bush lost the presidency, the Republican party emerged intact. It gained seats in the House of Representatives (the only time in the century that has happened when the party's president was defeated), broke even in the Senate, and made substantial gains on the state legislative level. As is customary in the face of a presidential defeat, I stepped down as party leader. I did so with my love for politics intact and with an eye toward reclaiming the White House in the next election.

My personal odyssey from a grassroots volunteer as a high school student to the leader of one of our nation's two political parties is testimony to the virtue of involvement. Every door is open in politics—to men, women, young, old, minorities, the disabled, the disadvantaged. Politics asks only that you volunteer your time and make your voice heard. After that, your imagination will be your only boundary.

# INTRODUCTION

By Ralph Nader

Our society is reaching the point where the more citizens default on solving major pressing problems, the bigger the penalties. Fifty years ago if citizens did not reduce, reuse, and recycle, they found another dump. Now, if something is not done, we end up with a polluting incinerator a few miles away and with trucks and railway cars carrying hazardous waste through communities. Different responses—and different consequences—result from citizen inactivity or indifference. Whether it is street crime, poverty, business abuses, or toxic pollution, there is an inescapable impact on the quality of community life. Citizens working to build and rebuild movements of reconstruction and redress are faced with ever more complex and time-absorbing demands. These demands on our practice of citizenship grow with the expansion of a complex, interdependent society. Both our supply and quality of citizenship, equipped with modern democratic tools, must keep up.

This need logically brings us to our schools and universities, where there is inadequate emphasis on learning the civic skills needed to study, evaluate, and then improve society. Our educational institutions, in large part, are neglecting an important mission. Students rarely have the opportunity to study the phenomenon known as corporate crime even though it is widespread in the United States. Engineering or physics courses do not encourage students to merge theory and practice, for example, by applying what they have learned to a particular issue in the community. A pollution exposure, a water purification challenge, or a sewage-system problem could provide a clinical opportunity for students to contribute to their community. Almost every skill and academic discipline can find a ready use in the complex drive for social change and in the protection and advancement of people and rights in our society.

Students are citizens, they are buyers, they are or will be taxpayers. Yet they are not taught and encouraged to develop the citizenship skills that can improve their performance in these roles. The result is a shameful waste of human potential and millions of students who lack civic self confidence. Given the opportunity, many students could become effective advocates for democratic solutions to our society's problems.

Despite media reports to the contrary, students today still have a basic generic idealism or desire for a better society. A report from People for the American Way concluded that students "are not, by and large, selfish or apathetic; they seem instead to be well-meaning people with weak civic skills." Provided with those skills and a chance to practice them, students can learn and grow. They can start to be judged by what they do,

rather than by their looks or their socioeconomic status. But student efforts face a number of obstacles. Many students are not involved in civic activity because of personal anxieties, concerns, and problems. They need encouragement in their shift to different commitments and priorities; they need a larger frame of reference. Involvement in important civic purposes such as environmental health, a just government, or minority rights can bring deep and lasting rewards. Working with others to address larger problems in society can help dissolve or reduce these personal perplexities.

Another hurdle is that most students do not look at themselves as a unique group. The higher education community in the United States contains thirteen million community college, undergraduate, and graduate students. Yet students who are thirteen million strong do not have even one weekly national television program that addresses what they are doing and thinking about outside the athletic arena. Because they do not consider themselves as a distinct class in the population, engaged in interesting and important activities on campus, students have little self-realization that they need, deserve, and can demand such a program. In fact there are, already, engineering students who are working to develop solar energy and new kinds of automotive engines. Students are artists, poets, activists. These pursuits deserve the kind of media and public attention now paid to other, equally important social groups.

Further, students underestimate their own power. If intimidated by university trustees who deny their democratic or educational rights, they must look for ways to challenge the trustees, uncover their conflicts of interest, and appeal for alumni and community support. They should realize they can become the statewide experts on an issue, as evidenced by student Jill Siegel, who is profiled in this book on page 37. They should realize that collectively they can put together a successful information or legislative campaign. Such activities take time, planning, and skill, but they can be accomplished. Some people forget that students have been key organizers or backers of the major social movements of the past three decades: the civil rights movement, the anti-apartheid campaign, and the environmental and antinuclear movements. Indeed throughout U.S. history, it is citizens, from minorities of one to mass movements, who in a thousand ways over two hundred years have rescued their country from shame, error, cruelty, and decline.

To overcome obstacles to greater civic experience, students need to appreciate their present assets. They are near the peak of their idealism. With their access to libraries, laboratories, and faculty, they have a proximity to technical information that is highly desirable in any kind of public policy struggle. Students can double-track their scholarly or academic work with their civic action. For instance, in political science courses, students can profile members of Congress or agency heads and disseminate

what they learn through the media. In chemistry and biology courses, students can test drinking water and air samples, and measure food contamination. They can apply their knowledge to political action.

A steel worker is going to have trouble going to the steel mill, putting in a day's work, and fighting pollution at the same time. The worker might be fired for being an advocate. Students are much freer, which is another advantage that they have. They are at an age and in a situation more conducive to assuming bold steps, to speaking out in protest. Students have the time, energy, idealism, and resources to act in the movements of today and of the future.

Finally, students have their own local media—newspapers and radio stations—and their own gathering halls in which to meet and rally for their causes. Most citizens do not have access to comparable facilities in their daily environments. What remains is for students to develop a frame of reference and map out fruitful directions for their energies.

Students need to compare their rights with the rights of citizens in some other countries who cannot speak out, protest, demand better working conditions, stop police brutality, or participate in democratic elections. There are not many countries in the world where civic work can be carried forward as it can in the United States, under the blessing of our Constitution and the active citizens who give its words both foundation and life. Today, students in other countries are on the ramparts, risking their lives to get a fraction of the rights that students in the United States have and too often do not use.

The plain fact is that each of us is both a private citizen and a public citizen. Most students want a good station in life, a good income, a home, a car, and a vacation cottage. That's being a private citizen. Usually, people are adequately motivated in the private area. What we need is a special effort in the public citizen area. That effort can be endlessly rewarding. Civic participation is a formula for human happiness, both private and public. It is more than a slogan to be intoned or even a duty to be self-imposed; it is a delight to be savored as the essential quality of life that makes democracy an authentic reality. It will be a pleasure for students to fulfill themselves by applying the principles of justice in a democratic, community forum—complete with debate, dialogue, advocacy, assertion, and implementation. They will see that, as some battles are lost, others are won. They learn to keep going and that from loss and adversity come the positive benefits of becoming more strategically astute and more determined.

This experience is reflected in the current history of student-funded and student-directed public interest research groups (PIRGs). These groups have full-time staffs operating in many states to improve their communities and train students to become participating citizens long after graduation.

In a nation characterized by its progressive development of humane ideals, what has begun as a sensitive effort by a few volunteers has often matured into more deeply rooted structures that have defended and implemented a set of enlightened values on a daily basis. Fire fighting, libraries, soil conservation programs, women's right to vote, worker safety, civil rights, consumer rights, legal services for the poor, feeding programs for the hungry, laws protecting the many against the few, educational institutions and services—these are a small sample of social improvements stimulated into being by people who had broader definitions of human values or citizen work than their contemporary cultures initially recognized.

Some of America's students are already among our active citizens. They have learned to combine their energy, academic knowledge, and organizational skills with their dedication to the community around them. They are preparing themselves for life and for work as citizen/activists—the true legacy of a democratic society.

To those students who have yet to make a commitment to civic life: Why not resolve to make a mark on your school and community *before* you leave college, so that those who come after you will benefit? Do not simply coast and accept what has been given by those who have gone before. Try to change and improve, expand, and enliven the atmosphere, the environment, the courses, and the curriculum. Your sense of contributing to a legacy, of having a longer view, and of benefiting more than yourself will be very valuable to you throughout your life. May the following pages find their uses in the minds and hearts of citizens eager to build a more just, sustainable, and happy world.

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