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Illinois Reform Commission  
North Central College  
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I salute Governor Pat Quinn and the members of the Illinois Reform Commission, and I appreciate the opportunity to share my ideas with you. I offer them with humility.

As a county treasurer responsible for collecting property taxes, I am familiar with the cynicism, distrust, misunderstanding, and frustration held by Illinois voters. I hope this commission's work will reduce those negative attitudes toward government and help restore citizen faith in our democratic process.

I'm not here tonight to speak about campaign finance reform, procurement reform, or enforcement of new and existing regulations, worthy topics all. Instead, I wish to share with you some thoughts I had after former Governor Rod Blagojevich's arrest on December 9, 2008. I thought hard about why some elected officials become corrupt and what might prevent such.

I reflected on my experience running for office five times since 1993, four times for the Board of Education of Joliet Township High School District 204 and once for Will County treasurer.

Each campaign was, so to speak, the easiest job interview I've ever had. I'm specifically talking about two staples of campaigns, the newspaper questionnaire and the candidate forum.

Both asked predictable, pro forma questions for which boilerplate answers sufficed. In my five election campaigns in the last sixteen years, only once has a newspaper editor called to ask a follow-up question about an answer I gave on a questionnaire.

In my four campaigns for the school board, I was invited to only one candidate forum. In my 2006 campaign for county treasurer, I participated in at least six campaign forums, none held during the primary election in which I had an opponent.

All six 2006 general election candidate forums invited candidates to speak for approximately three minutes about his or her reasons for seeking office. Only two of the forums entailed answering questions, and at each of those two, I faced no more than two questions. Thus, most of the forums in which I participated consisted of predictable rhetoric which escaped explicit examination.

Voters and candidates, I believe, would be better served by candidate forums with teeth: panels of knowledgeable questioners, opportunities for audience members to ask questions, and wide dissemination of the proceedings via old and new media. Moreover, a campaign educates not only the voter. A campaign also educates the candidate as well. A candidate learns on the trail what is expected of him or her. If little depth or thought is demanded on the campaign trail, the candidate may govern with little depth or thought.

I ask this commission to consider stimulating candidate forums with teeth throughout Illinois. This would require civic organizations—central labor bodies, chambers of commerce, colleges and universities, service clubs, veterans organization, farm bureaus, and the like—to coordinate the presentation of candidate forums throughout a county or legislative district, forums structured to be more than a procession of unchallenged stump speeches.

A large number of meaningful candidate forums would afford voters a view of candidates other than that manufactured by the candidates' paid advertising, and perhaps lessen the pressure on candidates to raise funds for political advertising.

The need for thoughtful elected officials of substance brings me to the second idea I offer. Last summer I was fortunate to attend Harvard's Kennedy School of Government executive education program in state and local government, a three-week course. A salient feature of the course was the study of what I came to call *The Basics*: works by Locke and Burke, the Federalist Papers, and scholarly articles about Hamilton and Jefferson. As I reflected on former Governor Blagojevich's alleged crimes, last summer's coursework on the seminal works of American democracy loomed large.

My re-exposure to these works reminded me there is an intellectual foundation to the work of governing. I became reacquainted with the first principles of our democracy. The effect was sobering. I realized that election to office has placed me in a heritage of enduring achievement, great sacrifice, and towering judgment and courage. I realized I have a sacred responsibility to maintain that heritage. I realized that my conscience should be populated by the Founders, by the abolitionists and suffragettes, by every soldier who has worn our country's uniform, and by every honest man and woman who has held public office.

Not every elected official in Illinois will be fortunate enough to attend the program I attended in Cambridge. Therefore, I suggest this commission consider helping Illinois colleges and universities organize and present similar programs. I am in preliminary discussion with the University of Saint Francis in Joliet about a program of several days' length to which Will County elected officials would be invited. Our hope is that a refresher course in the great works which undergird our democracy will strengthen the intellect, character, and dedication of elected officials. I needed that strengthening. I believe our beloved state does, as well.

Thank you.