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## RIPE FOR REFORM: ARKANSAS AT A CROSSROADS

“What other state besides Arkansas has made so much progress so quickly over the past decade?” said Panel Executive Director Bill Kopsky. “We’ve transformed our education system. We’ve kept a balanced budget and avoided painful cuts in the social safety net that have crippled other states. We have a long way to go because we started so far back, but we are making up ground,” Kopsky said.

But questions about the state’s direction loom in this year’s election. “Are we headed in a continued positive direction of creating progress...or are we headed toward a more polarized politics that leads to impasses, disenchantment, and disempowerment? We’re at a real crucial moment in our politics and policy making.”

These words, from Dr. Jay Barth’s presentation of the Panel-commissioned “Ripe for Reform” report which he authored, express the gravity of the political situation in Arkansas and the need to make this election about the issues that affect residents the



*Dr. Jay Barth, Sen. Joyce Elliott and Rex Nelson discuss the amazing progress Arkansas has made on a number of progressive issues at the Clinton School presentation of the Panel’s report, “Ripe for Reform.”*

most, rather than about polarizing wedge issues or partisan politics.

### **What’s at Stake**

“Many candidates are trying to avoid talking about the hard issues,” said William El-Amin, Election Reform Chair of the Arkansas Citizens First Congress. “It’s our job as citizens to make them go on the record with their

plans for addressing the budget, education, the environment and more.”

Progress on education, fair taxes, the environment and much more is in the balance this election. An increasing number of lawmakers are talking about backing away from the education improvements we’ve created in the past ten years. Some candidates

## RESIDENTS MAKING VOICES HEARD IN ELECTIONS



*Concerned Citizens of Monticello hosted two candidate forums leading up to the primary election May 22, with over 100 people attending the first.*

As primaries approach on May 22, residents are educating voters, holding elected officials accountable, and advocating for clean and fair elections. Community groups across the state have been meeting with election commissioners and hosting candidate forums.

"It's refreshing because candidates need to know who they're going to be representing when they assume office," said P. Luevonda Ross, a local attorney based in Monticello who moderated one of the candidate forums in Monticello. "It also gives the public a chance to let officials know that they'll be held accountable."

Most of the community groups in the Panel's organizing network have a Political Awareness committee. These committees educate members about the political process and

provide information and training to help residents increase their level of participation and hold elected officials accountable. See 'Stepping Into Local Politics' on page 3 for more on how the committees work.

Groups in Gould, Monticello, Prescott and other communities met with their local election commissioners to learn more about the electoral process and how they can become more involved in it. "Most people, if they don't spend time

studying the election process like this, they don't know the specifics of how it works." said Ms. Remona Block of Prescott Concerned Citizens. "After we spoke with the Commissioner, now we've got people who want to get trained and become poll workers."

After meeting with the Lincoln County Election Commissioner in Gould, members of the Gould Citizens Advisory Council decided to develop legislative proposals to improve the election process and correct some of the irregularities they've seen in their town over the years. "We found out that only one worker per polling place is required to be trained. We're proposing that all poll workers be required to have training," said one member of GCAC. "We've had our share of problems with elections here, and we want to see that change."

In addition to educating residents about the election process, community groups are holding candidate forums to provide residents with a chance to interact with those running for local offices so they will be more informed when they go inside the voting booth. In many communities, the groups hosted the only candidate forums for primary elections in their entire district.

"One of our biggest goals right now  
*cont.->*

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— P. Luevonda Ross, Monticello

is to inform voters and these forums are a big part of that," said Joe Britton, chair of the Concerned Citizens of Monticello. The group hosted a forum for candidates running for county offices on April 24 that drew a diverse crowd of over 100 people, with black and white residents, Democrats, Republicans, and Tea Party members all in attendance.

The candidates field questions from the audience and have some time for personal interaction afterwards. The group prepares some of the questions beforehand, based on their analysis of the most pressing issues in the community, while also allowing members of the public to ask their own questions.

Britton noted that it was very enlightening for the group and the public to see how familiar or unfamiliar the candidates were with the issues most critical to the audience. "I hope some of the people in the audience will think about running for office themselves next time," he said.

More community groups are hosting candidate forums including Prescott Concerned Citizens, Gould Citizens Advisory Council, and the recently formed Arkansans for Responsible Gas Development, based out of the Fayetteville Shale area in north central Arkansas. The forums will continue throughout the months leading up to the November 2012 election.



Community groups across the state—from Guy to Marvell to Huttig—are hosting candidate forums to inform people about the electoral process and let people see where candidates stand on important issues. Pine Bluff Concerned Citizens [left], Gould Citizens Advisory Council [right], and Arkansans for Responsible Gas Development [below] hosted three of the forums held so far, and groups plan to continue the forums leading up to the November election.

## **STEPPING INTO LOCAL POLITICS**

### **Organizing**

Community groups form a political awareness committee, elect a chairperson, and organize monthly meetings.

### **Training**

The committee organizes training and workshop sessions for the public to learn how local, county, and state government works.

### **Developing a platform**

The committee works with the larger group and the public to make a platform for the changes that they want in their community.

### **Meeting with election commissioners**

The committee organizes a meeting with election commissioners so members of the public can learn how the election process works and how they can become more involved in it.

### **Candidate forums**

The committee organizes a forum where the public has an opportunity to interact with candidates running for local office.

### **Candidate interviews/endorsements**

Some committees also meet with candidates and ask if they're willing to support the group's platform in exchange for an endorsement.

### **Voter Education**

The committee educates voters about the issues facing the community and candidates' positions on those issues.

### **GOTV**

The committee organizes efforts to increase voter turnout.

**REFORM** |continued from page 1|



*Arkansas's small size and emphasis on personal relationships allow people like Zessna Garcia easy access to Arkansas lawmakers.*

for office are openly talking about relaxing regulations on natural gas fracking operations, even while evidence mounts of violations and environmental damage from those facilities.

Arkansas faces a potential \$390 million shortfall in the Medicaid budget that provides healthcare to children, the elderly and the disabled. Those dollars are matched 3 to 1 by the Federal Government, so it could result in a cut as big as \$1.2 billion in health care to our most vulnerable citizens. How legislators respond to that crisis will have a huge impact on everyone in the state. At the same time, legislators proposed tens of millions in tax cuts for the wealthy in the last session, which would make our state budget situation even worse.

"Candidates should explain their

vision for the future," said El-Amin. "We can't let them say they're for cutting taxes without telling us what health or education or highway program they'd cut. We need to know where they stand on the issues that matter to all of us."

Who we elect in the coming years will determine if we will keep making progress. "You have to talk to legislators, let them know about the issues in your community, and hold them accountable," said Rep. Fred Love of Little Rock, speaking to

members at the Citizens First Congress Pre-Convention in April.

Arkansas's progress in recent decades has been mostly due to an increasingly engaged public (thanks in part to the hard work of members of the CFC and community groups in the Panel's organizing network), and a legislature that's willing to work together and pass bills that help improve everyone's lives.

Arkansas has also largely avoided the type of polarization that we're seeing so much of on the national political scene. Arkansas's history of progress has been bi-partisan, with both Republican and Democratic leaders driving our state's progress. From Mike Huckabee to Mike Beebe, Winthrop Rockefeller to Bill Clinton, Arkansas reformers have transcended their party ties and shown their ability to work across political lines to make the changes that we need happen.

"Arkansas is at our best when we elect leaders who appeal to our hopes and our needs rather than our fears and our prejudices," said Rex Nelson at a panel discussion after a Dr. Barth's presentation.

However, the 2011 legislative session was also one of the most partisan and polarizing sessions in recent history. Many votes went along strict party lines, which is unusual in the *cont.* →

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— William El-Amin, CFC Election Reform Chair

Arkansas legislature.

If Arkansans elect individuals who represent narrow interests and refuse to cooperate with others, we could see Washington Politics come to the Capitol in Little Rock.

### **How Can We Get Involved?**

In the face of these potential dangers, it's critical for activists and reformers to think practically and work to increase grassroots participation in the political process. Community groups all over the state are increasing their activity by hosting candidate forums for the public (see full article, page 2).

In addition, citizens should call candidates. "Personal calls to legislators really work. It's important that we use this to our advantage so that we can be more effective in making the election about issues," said Dr. Barth.

Dr. Barth also notes that 2012 is not just a one-shot deal. "This whole decade is going to be very defining. It's not just one election, we need a more ongoing, sustained energy to continue our success."

Ultimately, the advances that Arkansas has made in recent decades have shown that we are ripe for reform. We must work together to

make 2012 a decisive election for a better Arkansas. We must look beyond partisanship and elect leaders who will continue to move our state forward rather than allowing it to stagnate and fall behind.

In the "Ripe for Reform" report, Dr. Barth identifies five structural advantages for reform that are uniquely Arkansan: our political culture, our small size, our strong nonprofit community, our history of reform and progress and our ability to impact the rest of the South and the country as a whole. See the report on our new website at [www.arpanel.org](http://www.arpanel.org).

**"ARKANSAS IS AT OUR BEST WHEN WE ELECT LEADERS WHO APPEAL TO OUR HOPES AND OUR NEEDS RATHER THAN OUR FEARS AND OUR PREJUDICES."**

— Rex Nelson



*Lessie Mangrum with Governor Mike Beebe. Arkansans tend to elect leaders who compromise and are not ideologues, whether Democrat or Republican.*

#### **ARKANSAS CITIZENS FIRST CONGRESS STEERING COMMITTEE**

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## NAN DE VRIES: A VOLUNTEER'S LEGACY



Nan De Vries, our newest Legacy Donor, is one of the Panel's most passionate supporters and behind-the-scenes leaders. "The fundraising committee was talking about legacy giving and so I decided to write the Panel into my will. I think it's a great way to support the organization in an ongoing way," she said.

"I started volunteering with the Panel in '98; helping with flower arrangements and photography at events. You mostly see me behind the scenes, helping with the food and taking care of details," she says.

"In an organization like the Panel, where we often reach for the sky, someone like Nan who pays attention to logistics is invaluable," said Bill Kopsky, Panel Executive Director.

Nan's modest personality belies her adventurous spirit. One of six children in an Indiana farm family, she learned early how to work hard and have fun. Every spring, once

the crops were in, her father led the family on "fishing vacations" as far away as Saskatchewan and the Boundary Waters. They brought home enough fish to feed the family that winter. Her parents paid attention to politics too, and she met President Dwight D. Eisenhower on a campaign stop when she was 6 years old.

Nan's 4-H calves helped fund her nursing degree. She went to work in Chicago, then Nashville, and then moved to Arkansas. "I wanted to move to a place with clean air and clean water because that's what I grew up with," she said.

**"YOU MIGHT NOT  
THINK YOU HAVE  
MUCH, BUT WHAT  
YOU LEAVE BEHIND  
CAN BE A BIG HELP"**

— Nan De Vries

Nan's work financed her nature adventures. She visited the Florida keys when Jacque Cousteau was there assessing the coral reefs, and she visited the Peruvian rainforest with the famed USDA botanist James Duke. But in 1999, a neck injury reduced Nan's ability to work. Since then, she has stayed closer to home in Mt. View, where she has given many forest tours for children. "I like to expand children's sense of wonder by exposing them to nature."

Living on a reduced income did not stop Nan from continuing her love affair with nature. Along with gardening, she joined environmental groups and began working with the Panel and Citizens First Congress. In 2002, she co-founded the Panel/CFC fundraising committee and became one of our first monthly donors. "I love volunteering here, it's a great group of people. It feels like family, everyone is accepting and aware of other people's issues. It's a big part of what's needed in society — that we care about each other and be respectful."

The Panel's new Legacy Donor Program inspired Nan to make a long-term commitment to the Panel in her will, becoming one of our first Legacy Donors. For the Panel, this gesture means a great deal. Legacy Donors help sustain the Panel's ability to bring Arkansans together to make Arkansas better in the future.

"Everyone can become a legacy donor," said Nan. "You might not think you have much, but what you leave behind can be a big help. I'm so impressed by the progress the Panel and CFC have made in the state. Let's keep it going."

**For more information about the legacy donor program or other ways you can give, contact Beth Ardapple at [bardapple@arpanel.org](mailto:bardapple@arpanel.org) or (870)434-5265, or talk to your attorney about putting the Panel in your will.**

## CITIZENS FIRST CONGRESS BUILDING TEN PRIORITIES FOR A BETTER ARKANSAS

This June, the 50 member groups in the Arkansas Citizens First Congress will come together at the CFC Convention to vote on the CFC Platform for the 2013 legislative session. It's a chance for people to participate in a representative democracy, where delegates from member groups collaborate, negotiate, and decide on what policies they want to push to make Arkansas a better place.

"This process is what made me believe that it's possible to make an impact on policy and government," said Faye White of Gould. "After my first convention, I was excited to come back to Gould and become more politically involved in my own community."

The CFC's caucuses (built around issues and geographic regions) meet between sessions to develop their short list of the issues that they want to see on the CFC's Ten

Priorities for a Better Arkansas, which will be voted on in June. The caucus meetings provide an opportunity for members to focus on the issues most important to them and develop their analysis in order to build legislative campaigns. When all the caucuses meet together at the Convention, members get a chance to see how all the issues are connected and how they can make a bigger, more holistic impact by electing priorities and supporting each other's campaigns.

At the Convention, June 22-24, delegates from member groups will vote to replace or renew these priorities and form a new legislative platform for the CFC.

"I'm excited to see this process coming to a head once again," said CFC Co-Chair Kate Althoff. "This group keeps getting better and more organized; we're on track for a very effective legislative session next spring."

### **Register for the CFC Convention!**

**June 22-24, 2012**

**4-H Center, Ferndale**

Register at [www.CitizensFirst.org](http://www.CitizensFirst.org) **by June 8**

to help choose the 2012/2013 Ten Priorities for a Better Arkansas



*CFC groups met at the Capitol on April 28 for the CFC Pre-Convention. They brought to the table their plans for legislative campaigns, which they've been developing over the last few months within their regional or issue caucus meetings. "Today was a great day," said CFC Co-Chair Kate Althoff [left, with CFC Co-Chair Rev. Kenneth Anderson]. "We witnessed a diverse group come together, find common ground, and discuss issues in a productive way. It's a refreshing antidote to the polarizing conversation we see so frequently on the national level. That's what makes the CFC so great."*



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