

“Why the Caucus System is Better “ *The Seattle Times* May 10, 2007 By Krist Novoselic. Opinion article.

<http://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/why-the-caucus-system-is-better/>

The right of free association is an ideal fundamental to our society.

With this right, citizens who share the same values or needs come together. We can seek out like-minded people within our communities to join or create entities like hobby clubs, trade groups, fraternal organizations, churches or political associations, among others. The private organization possesses a charter and the resulting bylaws make the rules for members to follow.

Our courts recognize the importance of this and have ruled accordingly. Free association is why Washington’s blanket primary was struck down in federal court. Essentially, political associations are private entities entitled to conduct their own affairs.

Of course, a political association can hold social events and perform community services. But the main purpose of a party is to stand candidates for public election.

With the presidential primary issue, the antagonizing pick-a-party system is back in the forefront. But this time much of the clamor is for state-controlled nominations.

Many want a pick-a-party primary to nominate a candidate for president. They feel publicly funded and administered ballots are more inclusive because party affiliates can vote over a period of time, or from afar.

People fear the caucus system will be abused by party insiders who will manipulate the process.

If these issues override a party being able to nominate candidates by its own rules, we might as well go to a nonpartisan qualifying system. But people will still organize, associate or caucus. The prominent party function as a conduit around campaign limits will endure.

I was one of the 161 central committee officers of the Democratic Party who voted for a caucus. Members representing active Democrats all over our state came together to decide this important issue. Several county and district organizations wanted a primary. In the end, delegates voted for a caucus — hardly the whim of some kind of boss.

Also, it’s unfortunate that active members of a political organization are put down as elitist. The real elite in our democracy use consultants, paid media and other aspects of the professional campaign industry to promote their interests. Local volunteers don’t operate at lavishly catered special-interest events. It’s more like potlucks and bake sales for folks who only come together because of shared values or needs.

I voted in favor of caucuses because my local organization will benefit from this opportunity to bring people in. The caucus system is a community event run by volunteers. Partisan primaries drive down local participation in favor of expensive media campaigns.

Some argue that caucuses nominate fringe candidates, and they have. But Washington Democrats nominated John Kerry in 2004, who seemed very electable. Republicans nominated the incumbent president.

Our state needs to let go of its control over nominations for public offices. We’re moving in that direction.

In 2006, Pierce County voted to eliminate the pick-a-party primary for county elections, in favor of private nominations and instant runoff voting. Leaders from major and minor political associations, along with representatives of the attorney general and secretary of state, are working with county government on the change. Parties will have the incentive to nominate multiple candidates for the same office. Thus, voters get what they really want — more choices.

There is universal lament over the lack of participation in our elections. Although imperfect, decentralized caucuses open the door to involvement — a needed response to the high-priced culture of contemporary politics.