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Elections 2000--A Bad Dream?

by VARIOUS CONTRIBUTORS

[from the August 9, 1999 issue]

We asked some of our regular contributors to respond to "The Other Y2K Crisis," an editorial by Stephen Gillers in the last issue. Their comments follow.

--The Editors

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JOEL ROGERS

Stephen Gillers's Y2K nightmare is a Republican "trifecta" capture of national government next year--the legislature by force of incumbency, the presidency from Gore fatigue (a condition most have suffered since Gore's political toddlerdom) and the judiciary by dint of Supreme Court retirements during the ensuing Republican watch. He thinks it urgent that *Nation* readers figure out how to prevent this. I wonder about the terms of the discussion.

Let's start with prescription. Despite an unspecified option of doing "something else entirely," Gillers's basic thrust is that the danger of three-branch Republican dominance--the product of its probability and the horror of its achievement--is great enough that we should all focus single-mindedly on these elections.

I'm less persuaded of the danger. Although the Senate seems a hopeless candidate for Democratic takeover, I think the House can still be gained. I also doubt that a Republican President, especially one as studiously nonideological as Bush, will succeed in packing the Court. (Recall that Justices John Paul Stevens and David Souter, whom Gillers identifies as the Court's liberal wing, were both appointed by Republicans, as was Earl Warren, whose Court's achievements Rehnquist & Co. have labored so long, and largely unsuccessfully, to overturn.)

But let's say most *Nation* readers are frantic with concern. What can they do in the next several months? I'd say first recognize that your population is small, and the electorate is large. If you really want to make a difference, get organized and target. Don't sweat the presidential or Senate stuff, as neither your vote nor money will make much difference. Concentrate on the House races. Mass your money into fifteen competitive contests, coordinated with the AFL-CIO and others doing similar targeting, perhaps by forming a *Nation* Reader PAC, to which we might contribute. Figure 100,000 subscribers, many of more than adequate means. Figure 30 percent taking a pledge at \$500 apiece. A nice war chest of \$15 million, which, spent over as many races, could work some constructive damage and help take back the House.

But more generally, and notwithstanding its possible legitimacy here, I hope we won't forever let Gillers's starting point be the default starting point in progressive discussion of electoral politics--a default that focuses on the next election, fixates on federal government and is silent on the organizational requirements of a progressive electoral power. The fact is, the terms of the next election are already largely decided, and at present include next to nothing of use to working-class Americans. The fact is that the policies that most affect that class are increasingly set in the statehouse and at the county and municipal level. And the fact is that corporate-rightist abuse of it didn't just

happen--it reflects years of work building an infrastructure of recruitment, training and program supports to those candidates willing to administer that abuse, beginning at those state and local levels. We progressives don't have anything like that. We need to think longer term and build it, and its message, or forever lose and be locked in desperate conversations like this.

Joel Rogers, a Nation contributing editor, teaches at the University of Wisconsin. His latest book (with Richard Freeman) is What Workers Want (Cornell).
