

The Republic and The People

Working in the proverbial trenches of Campaign 2008 I was daily confronted with the question of whether our Republic's conduct of elections is serving the people. A very substantial proportion of the voters that I spoke with expressed a deep disappointment with the options with which they were presented. Why is this so?

Political campaigning at the national level happens only once every four years. You may think that the campaigns are long, even too long. It looks that way because they are carried out with intensity and include quite a bit of venom. Campaigns have to be conducted that way because there is no real continuity of party platforms. Every election new candidates have to communicate new positions on issues to the voting public. This makes the process dynamic, yes, but we all know that in the end Congress is a strong moderating force and little really changes. The combination of election hype and political inertia is what puts people off. What to do?

Perhaps we can learn something from other democracies. In much of Western Europe private money plays no role in the campaigns. The political parties are allocated time-slots on radio and TV in which they can make their case. The duration of these time-slots is long enough for sound bites to be useless. Parties have to present an attractive program that is informative and the programs run throughout the year, not just when it is election time. Because the executive branches of these democracies usually are formed by agreement between multiple parties and because the parliaments are all able to vote their executive out of office, there is a greater incentive for the members of both branches to carry out the policies that were agreed upon. Adventurism can quickly be controlled. The combined elements of continuous low-level conversation between government and electorate and the instant ramifications against broken promises make the voters feel that their system of government serves them reasonably well. What does that mean for America?

In my conversations with myriad voters in Western Virginia, most of which were self-declared Republicans, many expressed the wish that private money ought to be left out of politics. These same people preferred a system similar to that of other Western democracies. This runs counter to the belief that Americans are afraid of public financing of campaigns -- that they think that free speech guarantees of the

First Amendment will be infringed upon under a public finance system. Many expressed the belief that equal speech does not exist under a system that gives more exposure to larger wallets. In addition they observed that more speech too often leads to a low quality speech. The voters wanted to be informed about the issues, not in 30 second sound bites but through more in-depth explanations. This is where, under the present system, the voters' interests run counter to that of the elected officials. The latter prefer to bind the voters to them with emotional issues. Bound voters are much more likely to support the official on other issues.

The current system of electioneering is as old as the Republic. It worked well when the voting public was practically limited to property owners (an effective left-over from colonial times) who had a large stake in government. As shareholders of the Republic they paid intense attention to their immediate interests. The winner-take-all congressional district provided adequate representation of the interests of all shareholders. Universal suffrage added people to the voting rolls whose interests with government were more indirect and diverse and whose participation was more collective by means of political parties. However, the first past the post system limits nuanced choice. Coalitions are formed within the parties and this is not very transparent to the voter. The democracies of Western Europe did not grow out of colonial shareholder government. Their parliamentary systems were designed to support universal suffrage (for men, women acquired their voting rights later). Many enjoy nationally elected (as opposed to regional or district), multi-party, representative legislatures. Voters have nuanced choices and governing coalitions are made between parties after an election. This transparency allows voters to judge their choices. We do not have to emulate the entirety of these systems and diminish our typical American individualism. We can adopt those elements that can serve our collective interests as individuals better. It is my hope and expectation that an Obama administration will address this issue and take the lead in reforming the way in which we conduct elections so that The Republic can more appropriately serve The People.

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