

PERSPECTIVES

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Impure thoughts on democracy



LONE VOICE IN THE WOODS

BRET JACOBSON

During the recent travails our nation has gone through in a debacle of an attempt to elect a president, there has been a surge of calls for the abolition of the Electoral College, citing a lack of fair and democratic machinery to fill the highest office in the land. This is just one more symptom of the blind rush to make America act like a pure democracy. But America is not a democracy, and citizens should start remembering that.

It is a common notion nowadays that this country is a democracy and that all accompanying values are at the heart of our political machinations, though that is not our common beginning at all. Everyone knows the nation's founders were distrustful of big government, but it should be noted that some were equally distrustful of the masses. Decisions on policies and personnel should not be made directly by a relatively uninformed public, many founders effectively reasoned.

Such a wariness is how we arrived at representative democracy. Population dictates our representation in the house of representatives, but each state received an equal number of senators so that states could retain some decision-making power of their own. Thus, when electoral votes are tabulated for each state, it equals the total number of representatives and senators, so citizens from large states are actually under-represented compared to their smaller state neighbors and total equality is lost.

Proponents of direct elections, the very epitome of pure democracy, argue that each voice should be counted equally. This notion is entirely frightening because it implies that every voice is equally well-informed and wise. Anyone examining the large audience for "The Tom Green Show" knows that not all citizens have the same intellectual capacity.

If you need proof that the public's wisdom doesn't always trump that of political powerbrokers, examine several presidents in American history. Honest Abe Lincoln was approved by a group of men in a smoky back-room deal and became one of our most respected leaders, taking the country to civil war and back whilst freeing the slaves. On the other hand, recent popular elections have tapped Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter as leader of the free world. Now try to assert the public's great wisdom.

It is not all that hard to deduce why there has been this push toward democracy. It was important to give disillusioned Americans the notion that they still had a voice in their government, and during the civil rights movement it was important to know that every voice had equal value, regardless of race.

One particularly interesting note on this push for a more perfect democracy is that one of the movement's greatest proponents, a liberal-leaning media, creates an interesting paradox. On the one hand they want high voter participation, theoretically the shining moment of a democracy, but are for the quieting of political discourse via campaign finance reform that severely limits the voice of third parties to the system. In the media's perfect world, elections would consist of high turnout and low voter information.

The answer to all America's problems are not solved through a deep and abiding trust of the average man. We elect representatives to use their knowledge and experience for the common good. The Electoral College is just one aspect of that greater machinery that should not be tampered with simply to feed an appetite for democracy borne of misunderstood civic history.

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The future according to Kleckner: A chad-free voting system



DIARY OF A MALCONTENT

MICHAEL J. KLECKNER

Thirteen days after Election Day we still don't know who the president is. This is great for columnists, as it gives us time to think about what went wrong and point it out gleefully. And really, I don't care who gets elected. Local issues are more important to me than some doddering fool who will say all the right lies during the campaign and then do all the wrong things in office.

What I really want to know is, why don't we have results yet? We live in a digital world. My washing machine has a freakin' computer in it, but we still punch holes in pieces of paper and have machines or other people try to interpret the holes and tally a winner. What is the point of this antiquated system? Are we trying

to invite difficulty and encourage corruption?

In St. Louis, polling places couldn't deal with the outpouring of voters. Some people weren't going to get to vote. The lack of facilities was the government's fault, so Democrats sued and got a court order keeping the polls open longer. Voters continued doing their duty until Republicans appealed and a court shut the polls down. So voters in St. Louis were left standing in line, unable to vote. That's sick and wrong.

On the home front, Republicans are claiming election fraud by Oregon's secretary of state, Democrat Bill Bradbury, because he told an aide that they were going to "pull it out for Gore." I could write a whole column about that, but the state only has seven electoral votes. As my co-worker Jeremy Lang noted at 3 a.m. election night, Florida stole our sunshine.

And wow, what fraud possibilities the Sunshine State offers. From a supposedly confusing ballot to "hanging chads" to a secre-

tary of state who is also one of Bush's top cronies in Florida: Columnists and comedians across the country have been having a field day.

But my point isn't to make fun of the poor Floridians who don't know how to vote or count. Too much Bingo isn't the culprit here — it's our sad excuse for a voting system. So I'll engage in a little futurism. It's nearly 2001; let's go on a voting odyssey.

Imagine you're in a mall in 2012. It's the middle of Election Week; there are only three more days left to vote. Do you rush home to begin poking at pieces of tagboard? No. Just walk over to one of the digital kiosk voting booths in the mall and vote in less than three minutes.

You step into the voting booth, seal the door and press your thumb on the touch screen. Your voter information is displayed for confirmation, and then the first item on the ballot appears. You must press the name of the candidate or the word "yes" or "no" for measures, and only one choice can be made before moving on to

the next item.

When you're finished, a complete list of your choices appears. If any of these need to be changed, touch the name and make a new choice. Your ballot is entered into the system, and when all the polls close, you'll find out who won.

The beauty of a system like this is its accessibility, accuracy and fairness. No news agency, no government body, no one would get results until the voting was finished. When the polls did close, the computer would release the final results; no re-counts, no projections based on 2 percent of precincts reporting, no voters turned away due to lack of facilities or scared away due to early results. Kiosks could be placed anywhere — malls, post offices, city halls or coffee shops.

Unlike voting on the Internet, as some pundits have suggested, digital kiosks would run on an intranet, so computer hackers wouldn't have access. Each county's election office would have a main server, and all offices would be connected by an intranet: Peo-

ple could register to vote up until the moment the polls close, and the computer would know instantly if the voter was registered elsewhere.

We don't have to wait until 2012 to have a fair, sensible and accurate voting system. Kiosks like this are a possibility now. No one needs to be confused by butterfly ballots any longer. TV networks wouldn't have to balance their sense of ethics against their need to be first — not that they're really balancing now. And most importantly, voters don't have to wait... and wait... and wait to find out the will of the people.

We have a strong economy and a budget surplus; let's use it to shore up our voting system and ensure that the legitimacy of our government isn't questioned. On the eve of the new millennium, can we please stop punching holes in pieces of paper?

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