

EDITORIAL

Voters look at state of politics and increasingly opt out

By Kevin J. McNamara

Everywhere there are signs that Americans increasingly are repelled by politics and are engaged in a full-fledged retreat from self-government. This development is a silent threat to our liberty, as government increasingly becomes a tool of a voting minority and professional politicians who govern for all.

With participation in elections on the decline, turnout in the 1992 presidential election could easily fall to less than one-half of the electorate; voting in mid-term congressional elections has long since become a minority activity. Voters in three states have approved limits on the number of terms legislators can serve. So few taxpayers contribute to the presidential campaign fund that it is in danger of bankruptcy.

"Why Americans Hate Politics" and "A Parliament of Whores" are the two most noteworthy current books on the subject of American

politics, and only one of them is intended as satire. A more scholarly study by two Cornell University professors argues that elections no longer matter very much. The Keating Foundation has published a report declaring that "Americans are apathetic about politics" and that "civic duty in America is dead."

Even at the local level, politics is increasingly seen as disreputable. Our community has banished political candidates from the annual July 4th parade. Main Street merchants routinely chase away from their doors office-seekers who attempt to hand out leaflets. Representatives who use government-paid postage to communicate with their constituents are roundly criticized, as are publicity-seeking politicians who seek to communicate through the media—as are politicians who have "lost touch" because they no longer communicate.

What has happened? Much of what has gone wrong can be traced

to the fact that Americans are withdrawing from the crowded, bustling public squares where public problems were once addressed. Public meetings go unattended; even the number of people who tune into the network evening news programs—a kind of nightly town meeting—has sharply declined. This has left our elected representatives without an audience, standing on the proverbial town green, now emptied, frantically waving their hands, attempting to get our attention. No wonder we find them irrelevant and their behavior a bit outrageous.

There are at least two reasons for this. One is that we quite literally isolate ourselves. Prosperity and technological innovation allow us to retreat to the quietude of work and home, where we are surrounded with a growing array of gadgets—personal computers, portable exercise equipment, VCRs, cellular phones, CD players, air conditioners, cable TV, and fax machines—

whose common purpose is to permit us to avoid direct contact with other people. It has become technically possible to travel around the world without ever venturing out-of-doors.

The retreat from public places is compounded by a withdrawal from politics. The decline of political parties and patronage and the simultaneous professionalization of government and its services means that most of us either receive what we need from government without having to ask for it, or we do not receive it because we are ineligible. Some reformers consider this "good government," yet greater reliance on rote bureaucratic methods makes government less responsive to the individual pleas of its citizens; it is thus not surprising that fewer people vote.

Thus the public square stands largely abandoned. Is it any wonder that politicians turn to television and radio advertising to reach us? This is, after all, where we are likely to be

found—inside our homes, inside our cars, inside our portable earphones. Because reaching voters in this way is enormously expensive, elected officials must constantly seek campaign contributions. The relentless pursuit of money has, more than any other development, fed the rot at the core of American politics.

Yet one wise individual has warned, "Let us not delude ourselves. Not even the best government, the best parliament, and the best president can do much on their own, and it would be profoundly unjust to expect them alone to put everything right. Freedom and democracy, after all, mean that we all have a part to play and that we all bear joint responsibility."

The speaker was Vaclav Havel, in his first address as president of the Czech and Slovak Republic. Havel set an example for his own people when he left behind the life of a playwright and became a presi-

dent. Indeed, he set an example for us all. We can't all become presidents, of course, but we must get involved. Self-government is otherwise just an empty slogan, and the few who will vote will make decisions for the rest.

Yes, it's up to you: engage politicians in conversation when you meet them; invite office-seekers to talk to you and your neighbors in your home; attend public meetings; write letters to your representatives and your local newspaper on issues that concern you; contribute what you can to candidates you can support, consider running for office yourself; by all means, vote. Self-government does not belong to an alien army of politicians, pollsters, and consultants. It belongs to us—until the day we surrender it.

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