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Aaron P. Daviet

AMERICA, DEMOCRACY, AND THE ROLE OF ELECTIONS

Elections are the central institution of democratic representative governments. Why? Because, in a democracy, the authority of the government derives solely from the consent of the governed. The principal mechanism for translating that consent into governmental authority is the holding of free and fair elections. – This according to the U.S. Department of State publication *What is democracy?* Elections, combined with strong democratic institutions, rule of law, and a civic culture, make democracies work. These elections will have an opportunity to add a historic chapter in America’s democratic tradition. After giving a brief background on some of the vagaries of American politics, I will highlight two interesting trends, Internet influence and changing voting patterns, and will attempt to put the upcoming election in its historical context.

There are two unusual facets of American politics that bear pointing out in such an essay. The first is that the president is chosen by the votes of electors, rather than by the popular vote. Each state has a certain number of electors, which correspond to the number of congressmen and senators the state has in the U.S. Congress. This has a few quirky results. The first is that American presidents are often elected with a plurality, rather than a full majority of votes, without a run-off. Presidents are sometimes even elected after receiving fewer votes than their opponent, as was the case with George W. Bush in the 2000 elections.

The second is that elections often turn on the results of only a few states, the so-called “swing states,” which see almost constant attention from candidates,

while the other states, categorized as red (Republican) or blue (Democratic), are relatively ignored as they will almost certainly vote for the same party they did in the last election. Certain swing states from the past national elections, such as Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania, will continue to play prominent roles in this election. Swing states can change in national elections, though, due to changing voting blocks, and this election should be viewed in that context.

The 2008 election season has been widely hailed as one of the most exciting and extraordinary election campaigns in the past hundred years. With neither President George W. Bush nor Vice President Dick Cheney running for President, it will be the first time since 1952 that no incumbent from either office will be up for election as President. In addition, the Democratic primary race featured Hillary Clinton, a female candidate, against Barack Obama, an African American, promising that one would be the first non-white-male presidential candidate from the major parties. These primaries set new records for participation in many states. The selection of Obama as the Democratic nominee has further energized many voters. It is certainly true that this cycle is unique. But will it result in big changes? To venture a guess it serves well to review 20th century American elections.

Changing voting patterns and coalitions

American elections often present the crystallization of changes in American political coalitions and emerging political trends. The selection of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 represented the desperation of the American people for relief from the Great Depression, and shifted the emphasis from a limited government to one that ensured that the population would not slip into debilitating poverty. This legacy was further extended in the 1960s, when the government went from being a type of insurer of the last resort for the poor towards programs pro-actively trying to end the cycle of poverty. The 1994 congressional elections, which saw large Republican gains pushing them into the majority, was in many ways a repudiation of this extension, and represented a swing in American political thought back to the idea that government action cannot fix problems such as poverty.

The 2008 election will not provide this type of change; indeed, neither candidate offers it, no matter what campaign slogans shout. I find stronger parallels rather with the 1992 presidential elections, where the election, rather than highlighting a change in American ideas, instead showed an effort by a political party to shift its stance in an effort to maintain/regain its relevance. In 1992 the Democrats, despite a congressional majority which stretched back – with short breaks – into the 1930s, had been out of the presidency since 1980, and were facing a Republican party invigorated by Ronald Reagan's conservative activism, pressing for smaller government, lower taxes, vigorous foreign policy and social conservatism in both the court system and on a personal level. To address this, Bill Clinton spearheaded

a policy of ‘triangulation’, where Democrats sought a middle ground on many social issues. This can best be represented, perhaps, by one of Bill Clinton’s signature presidential initiatives: welfare reform, which saw a tightening of welfare rules which shrank the scale of a previous Democratic program.

In this election, though, the roles are reversed. With control of Congress from 1994 until 2006, and control of the White House for the last seven years, the Republicans have implemented many of the policies they pressed for while in the political wilderness in the 1970s and 1980s, and now spend more energy defending their changes rather than pressing for new ones. The Democrats have more dynamic proposals, which often have stronger public support in polls, such as expanding insurance coverage to some or all of the 40 million uninsured Americans, redistributing some of the tax burden to those with higher incomes, implementing efforts to reduce dependence on and limit emissions of greenhouse gases. In countering this, the Republicans selected John McCain, known for his penchant for compromise and working with the Democrats, with whom he drafted legislation regulating financing of campaigns. Whether this strategy will work for the Republicans as it did for the Democrats in 1992 may well depend on the second important factor I would like to highlight: the increasing role of the Internet.

The role of the Internet

The ubiquity of the Internet in America means its role in the political process cannot help but grow. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center showed that 46 percent of Americans have received election information either via the Internet or via their cellphone. There are two primary ways that the Internet is impacting the current presidential and congressional campaign – through online media and through Internet fund-raising. The medium of the Internet has grown in importance, and it is not simply the traditional press heavyweights who are controlling the flow of information. For example, the independent site realeclearpolitics.com has become an important source for political commentary, and, perhaps more so, for political polling. The site has regular links to polls and to political markets, where participants invest money (either real or simulated) on candidates to win. These markets have proven to have a similar level of accuracy to polls, while being much easier to run logistically.

Internet fundraising first rose to prominence with the campaign of Howard Dean in 2004. Dean raised cash, and perhaps more importantly mobilized a group of voters to work for his campaign. The Obama campaign in this election has taken this concept even further, and Obama’s “rock-star” status among many college age students both contributed to and arose from his significant Internet presence and fundraising. The Pew Research Center noted that six percent of all adults have used the Internet in this campaign to donate.

The Local Aspect

The final point I would like to make is to highlight an under-appreciated but essential part of the American political system: local elections. “All politics is local,” goes the famous axiom authored by congressman and Speaker of the House Thomas ‘Tip’ O’Neill, and while this is usually used to show that Americans vote for parties and candidates based on issues that are locally important, it explains even better the fact that most everyday issues in America are handled by local government.

While the news media and international audiences focus on the international press, the most exciting (and in many ways important) elections in American are often at the local level. Due to America’s federal system of power, local and state governments have a great deal of authority, setting tax rates on purchase (the VAT) and property, administering police and school systems, and setting development priorities for cities and states. These local elections are vibrant and are the best example of the influence of elections and democracy. Candidates are often motivated to run because of their belief in a single issue, and accountability to voters once elected is high – city councils and school boards hold public meetings which are well attended. These elections are a high point of American democracy, and no discussion of American elections would be complete without their mention.

Whether the upcoming elections resemble the 1992 elections or not, whether they will produce any focal issues or lead to long-lasting changes, the elections represent a crucial part of the American democratic process, and thanks to the increasing use of the Internet and the increased interest in the primaries, more Americans will take part in this election than any other. As Walt Whitman, amongst the pantheon of great American poets, once said, “I know nothing grander, better exercise, better digestion, more positive proof of the past, the triumphant result of faith in human kind, than a well-contested American national election.”