

REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY: MAKING IT WORK BETTER

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George Bernard Shaw once observed that “democracy is the only form of government that gives people what they deserve.” The unfolding contest between Mr. Bush and Mr. Dukakis is a painful reminder of how right Shaw was. How, and for what purposes, the nominees intend to wield the Presidency’s awesome power and authority is a mystery of enormous magnitude. In this campaign the public has been treated to an almost uninterrupted diet of ambiguities, simplicities, evasions and negativism.

The relative impoverishment of the current political debate is not cost-free. Voter turnout this year may be the lowest in forty years and the failure of candidates to lay out their plans, define their priorities and reveal the difficult choices they are prepared to make *before the election* can only compound the difficulty of governing the nation effectively *after the election*.

Roosevelt Center’s Mission

These contemporary concerns help explain the Roosevelt Center’s mission. The Center’s overarching purpose is to make representative democracy work better. On both theoretical and practical grounds, we believe democracy operates at its best 1) when policy makers have continuous access to a body of informed public opinion; 2) when citizens’ ability to evaluate critically the decisions of their elected representatives is enhanced; and 3) when there are more, rather than fewer, opportunities for citizens to discharge their duty to be both informed and involved.

Since its founding six years ago, the Roosevelt Center, which is scrupulously nonpartisan and nonprescriptive in its treatment of policy issues, has involved more than 100,000 people in its activities and programs. In its quest to increase informed public involvement in the nation’s political business, the Center has developed educational materials and organized hundreds of community-based programs designed to:

- raise citizens' awareness of policy problems;
- familiarize them with the history and structure of those problems;
- lay out a full range of options for dealing with specific issues;
- encourage participants to form reasoned choices from among the options; and
- close the circle by delivering citizens' judgments as effectively as possible to appropriate policy makers.

The final objective deserves some elaboration. While education for education's sake is defensible, informed and concerned citizens really yearn for a larger voice in policy decisions that affect their lives.

Connecting Citizens with Policy Making

Experimenting with new ways of connecting informed citizens more effectively with policy making processes at all levels is a Roosevelt Center obsession and real and steady progress is being made.

One evening two years ago representative groups of citizens—a thousand in all—met in fifty state capitals. For several hours they considered and debated some forty options for reducing the budget deficit and for bringing the budget deficit into compliance by 1991 with the requirements of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings. All but three states met the deficit reduction goal and a national majority agreed on a package of program cuts and tax increases that would have reduced the 1991 deficit by \$75 billion. The next morning, at private briefings and a press conference in the Capitol, the results of this "people's budget" were unveiled. Later that day the center's staff briefed James Miller, director of the Office of Management and Budget.

Several months later the Center launched a massive eighteen-month voter education project in five states to raise the salience of policy issues in the presidential primary/caucus campaign. All told, some 45,000 people in Iowa, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Georgia and Illinois took part directly in "U.S. 88: A New Road to the White House." Policy crash courses (primers, videotapes, role-playing exercises and options papers) on topics as diverse as agriculture, Central America, trade, the global spread of nuclear weapons, long-term health care, U.S.-Third World relations and working families were developed.

Two thousand citizens, selected to reflect the demographic and political diversity of their states, served on statewide citizens assemblies. The assemblies developed a set of tough, informed questions for the presidential candidates to which they requested written re-

sponses. In the end, nearly one hundred policy questions, covering seven topics, were delivered to the thirteen candidates, netting a written response rate of 80 percent. Their answers were far and away the most comprehensive statements made on these subjects at that point in the campaign. The overall quality of these materials led to their repeated use by news organizations, political analysts and civic and educational organizations all over the country. In addition, hundreds of project participants also had the opportunity to face and directly question presidential candidates at three televised town hall meetings which in turn attracted large viewing audiences. What drove this process to a successful conclusion was not the Roosevelt Center per se, but rather the robust participation of thousands of ordinary citizens in the project and the media's fascination with what they regarded as an unconventionally wholesome exercise in grassroots democracy.

Presidential Agenda Project

The Center's current Presidential Agenda Project represents our latest effort to forge linkages between citizens and policy makers. This Saturday in Peoria, Illinois, the first of fourteen regional agenda-setting forums will take place. Across the country from Los Angeles to Savannah, these forums will involve 1,200 people, recruited through an open application process, who reflect their communities' diversity.

These citizens—farmers, retirees, students, business and professional people, blue collar workers and homemakers, Republicans, Democrats and political independents—will gather to determine which national problems they think the new President should make his top priorities in 1989. They will decide which strategies, both budgetary and nonbudgetary, the next administration should invoke in pursuing their chosen policy priorities. They will be challenged to reconcile their views on policy and spending priorities with the deficit-reduction requirements of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings—and they will be free to expand, retain, reduce or repeal the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings targets.

In November, a document called "A Citizen's Agenda for the President," a report based on the results generated by the Center's regional forums, will be delivered to the President-elect and his senior advisors. We are confident the report will be respectfully received and seriously regarded. Late next spring, our regional assemblies will reconvene at "first hundred day conferences" to appraise the new administration's policy agenda and reassess their own policy concerns and preferences.

WTTW/Chicago and WLS-TV, two of the country's premier public and commercial television stations, and the Center are cosponsoring two sets of televised forums with the presidential candidates in Oc-

tober. One set of forums will feature members of the Illinois Citizens Assembly posing questions directly to Mr. Bush and Mr. Dukakis at separate sessions about their plans and priorities; these programs are expected to be carried widely throughout the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and perhaps by National Public Radio (NPR) as well. The second set of town meetings will bring 120 bright and accomplished Chicago area high school seniors together with each nominee for a one-hour, prime time question and answer session. The Center believes that opportunities for interested citizens to interact with the candidates in settings in which informed citizens share center-stage with our would-be leaders are desperately needed. The delivery in November of citizen recommendations on policy and spending priorities represents a different, but no less important, linkage to the policy-making process.

What is the rationale for the Presidential Agenda Project? The President-elect will not lack for advice. Future cabinet members, members of Congress, political allies, policy experts, veterans of former administrations and public opinion and media advisors all will seek to influence the shape, texture and rhythm of the new administration.

But will there be any room at the table for ordinary Americans? The Presidential Agenda Project is designed to make a little room at the decision-making table for a representative cross-section of Americans.

This program is an experiment; the outcome is impossible to predict. I cordially invite you to consider organizing fifteen, thirty or fifty citizens in your own community to participate in the agenda-setting project.

Permanent Regional Operations

The agenda project is the prelude to the Center's chartering permanent operations in thirteen regions of the country by the end of 1988. In time, we hope to create a nationwide network of democratic laboratories that will continuously provide interested citizens, journalists and students with policy education experiences and expanded opportunities to engage the policy making community. These charter programs will have salaried staff, be budgeted in 1989 at between \$70,000 and \$150,000 each, and be governed jointly by local boards of advisors and the Center's staff.

It's been said that there is only one thing worse than a hopeless romantic—and that is a hopeful one. My colleagues on this panel and I—and presumably most of you too—are hopeless romantics. We all believe that our democratic system can, indeed must, be made to work better. We all believe, to recall Shaw, that we deserve something better than what we are getting. But we also know that a democratic renaissance will not come easily or cheaply. It will require

work, dedication, money, faith—and yes, a hard-edged romanticism. We are pleased to be part of this effort and hope that in the end the Center will have contributed modestly to improving the quality of our representative democracy.