

America's Elections: Why Should We Even Care?

by Louis René Beres (November 2014)

Routinely, in these United States, elections are praised as plausible evidence of democracy, and hailed, simultaneously, as a tangible source of hope and restoration. But if such plainly redemptive reasoning were actually correct, the state of our democratic union would be substantially more prosperous, happy, and secure. Fortunately, by looking further beneath the surface, we may begin to identify the apparent contradiction.

Once there, we could detect a critical fallacy in America's heavily mythologized democratic narrative. It lies squarely in failing to recognize what is truly most important, especially in promoting equality of rights and equality of opportunity. There, as foundational American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson and his kindred transcendentalists had already understood back in the nineteenth century, our failure points toward a very rudimentary and seemingly self-evident precept.

Nothing is ever as determinative for democracy as the private state of the individual human citizen.

Always, America's democratic institutions must remain shallow reflections of a much greater reality. This still-hidden truth, moreover, lies deeply buried in our complex society's accumulating and intersecting inventories of personal agonies and collective discontents. In essence, no institutionalized pattern of democracy, including even one with commendably regular and fair elections, can expect to rise above the personal ambitions, insights, and capacities of its citizens.

There is a difficult lesson here for all democracies that celebrate elections. It is that citizens must somehow learn to embrace what they have not yet even been told. It is that as a preferred form of governance, democracy is always about more than the ritual exercise and adoration of core institutions.

Ultimately, democracy represents nothing less than a bewilderingly dialectical interplay between reason and unreason, a subtle and also many-sided colloquy between those few who still seek authentic thought, and those many who wittingly yield to society's myriad bewitchments of language.

In the final analysis, we may learn from a very peculiar coupling, from Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish philosopher who informed that the “the crowd is untruth,” and from Bob Dylan, the American composer of an almost-corollary song lyric. “I’m trying to get away from myself,” sang Dylan, unwittingly reinforcing Kierkegaard, “as fast as I can.”

In the end, we may extrapolate from Kierkegaard and Dylan, our odd couple here, that even for long-established democracies, it is never for elections to cast light in dark places.

Let us be even more straightforward. *We the people* now inhabit a withering national landscape of incessant imitativeness, crass consumption, and utterly dreary profanity. Bored to tears by the banality of everyday life, and beaten down by the Sisyphean daily struggle to avoid despair amid brutally stark inequalities, we Americans now grasp desperately (if still unknowingly) for virtually any residual lifelines of escape.

Can all this be a sign of American democracy at work?

There is more. As a university professor, it is easy to see that any intellectual life for the citizenry has already become extraneous. Nowadays, any respectable volume on a life of the mind in America would be an excruciatingly short book. Once upon a time in America, Emerson had written promisingly of an enviable national democracy, one based upon “high thinking and plain living.” Today, however, virtually every young American’s expressed aspiration has more to do with pathetically self-validating accumulations of visible wealth, than with any serious acquisitions of learning.

Wisdom, our students learn very early on, simply doesn’t pay. Far more sensible, it will seem to them, to passively accept a much more convenient lifetime of intellectual debasement, political venality, and resigned betrayal – all in plausible exchange for “success.” In our starkly polarized democracy, young people are even instructed further by the academy. It is permissible for citizens to accept complicity in the self-mockeries of conformance or “fitting in,” they are advised, so long as this shamelessly calculated surrender of dignity will leave time for *voting*.

Already, in 1776, Adam Smith, in the *Wealth of Nations*, had observed that a society founded upon any such conspicuous inversion of values would be shaped by degraded measures of citizen self-esteem. Ironically, it is precisely this once revolutionary book that is so enthusiastically cited by prominent present-day Americans in defense of “conspicuous consumption.” The term itself, of course, was presumably invented by Norwegian-American sociologist, Thorsten Veblen.

Whatever happens in our upcoming elections, *we the people* will remain largely untouched by any gainful considerations of higher thought. Instead, visibly obsessed with social networks, apps, reality television, and “selfies,” our preferred preoccupation will still lie in running speedily away from ourselves. This is because what most clearly animates “The American People” these days is largely a voyeuristic ethos of self-debasement and self-indulgence, both in the multiple interstices of their own immediate pleasures, and in the manifold joys and sufferings of many unknown others.

When it is expressed by society as a sort of ritual incantation, ideology can quickly replace reason and rational judgment. Nonetheless, we Americans still tend to think viscerally, against ourselves, and against history. In the end, as we have already begun to re-discover, even the most ardently democratic societies can be transformed into thoroughly bitter and petrified plutocracies. Revealingly, our vaunted American democracy is now a place where everyone has a fully codified right to free speech, but where only a fortunate few can afford to keep their own teeth.

Sometimes, even the privileged are underprivileged. For the most part, even the most affluent Americans now inhabit the loneliest of lonely crowds. Small wonder, too, that so many millions cling desperately to their “medications,” cell phones, and Facebook or Twitter connections. Filled with an ever-deepening horror of having to be alone with themselves – a fiercely desperate condition philosophically anticipated by Kierkegaard, and musically acknowledged by Bob Dylan – these virtually connected millions are frantic to *belong*, that is, to claim some readily recognizable membership within the sheltering “democratic” mass. “*I belong, therefore I am.*” This is not what French philosopher René Descartes had in mind when, in the 17th century, he had urged skeptical thought, and also a reciprocally cultivated pattern of doubt. It is, rather, an abundantly sad and portentous credo for America. It virtually screams the stupefying and literally delusionary cry that social acceptance is as important as physical survival. In our own beleaguered times, at least for an unfortunately growing number of Americans, it can even mean that death is preferable to life.

In part, such meaning stems from the understanding that life without belonging would be insufferable.

There is more. Our American electoral democracy is rapidly making a machine out of Man and Woman. In what now amounts to an unforgivable reversal of *Genesis*, it even seems reasonable to conclude that we have been created not in the divine image, but rather *in the image of the machine*.

What went wrong? Didn't we Americans once speak convincingly of more elevated human origins? Or is the machine itself a new form of divinity?

As the election hoopla begins to become more obvious – always a sure way to deflect our attention from what is really occasioning both our private pain and general unhappiness – we Americans will remain grinning but rhapsodizing captives of long-standing public gibberish. Then, still stubbornly disclaiming any sort of an interior life, we will continue to chant, in robotic unison, our ongoing and absolute dedication to a material world of relentlessly crude commerce and flagrantly empty witticisms.

With our upcoming elections, American democracy's real enemy remains immune and unscathed, ready to do further harm, and to remind us all that hiding in the crowd does not a true democracy make. This enemy is readily identifiable. It is a pervasively unphilosophical spirit, one that fervidly demands to know everything of little value, and very little of what matters most.

As a professor for more than forty-three years, it is easy to see that our universities are no longer an oasis or refuge of serious thought. They are, instead, more typically bereft of anything that might hint at an informed encouragement for inquiring spirits. What matters most, on campus, is that the "investment" in college should prove measurably "cost-effective." To be sure, it is fully reasonable for students and their parents to link academic program options with eventual job opportunities, but it also makes sense, at some point, to seek a real education.

Today, the once-revered Western Canon of literature, art, music, and philosophy has been displaced by a steadily-expanding "pragmatism." Significantly, the long-term democratic consequences of this corrosive displacement have yet to be computed. At a minimum, however, they suggest a growing American population without any palpable connections to mountains of human history and oceans of human learning.

None of this is meant to suggest staying away from the polls on election day. On the contrary, at least on certain major issues, voting still has its distinctly meaningful place. Yet, in the much larger sense of what Plato had once urged upon ancient Athenian governments – that is, "to make the souls of the citizens better" – these formal exercises can never really hope to make a vital difference. In other words, whether we decide to elect candidates of one party or another, we will eventually converge upon an unambiguously primal and universal truth.

No democratic society, however institutionalized, systematic, and sacred its process of elections, can ever rise above the inclinations and capabilities of its individual citizens.

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