

SECTION B

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Why do we bother voting at all?

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The average citizen is receiving mixed messages when it comes to voting. One, a civic message, is clear: Voting is a special right in a free society; it is the citizen's chance to have a voice about decisions made on us. Some even add, with patriotic fervor, that it is a public duty.

A more subtle and perhaps more powerful message is the one that whispers, "Why bother?" This is the message not of the civics textbooks, but of everyday life and of the politics-watching that, for many of us, is the limit of our political involvement.

Democracy was born as an art of political involvement. Before the independence achieved by this great nation in 1776, democracy — rare as it was — was

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only considered possible in small communities. Cities that we would now think of as large towns, notably Athens and Geneva, were the outer limit, and they were the only places that knew any form of the government that actually trusted the people to rule themselves rather than rely on the ancient assumption that "their betters" should be in charge.

To bind the 13 former colonies into a single nation grounded in democracy, the founding fathers at the Constitutional Convention had to think outside the traditional democratic box. James Madison had the key insight. He made an end-run around the prohibition on size for a democracy by proposing that a large nation (he called the United States an "extended republic") could actually conduct a better democracy than a small one because there would be more diverse interest groups (he called them "factions") to balance off against each other. More balance meant less chance for any one faction to gain control and more democratic participation for more citizens.

Bracketing for now the fact that Madison and his peers limited their democracy to white, male, property-owners, his ideas had the seeds of our modern multiculturalism. He favored diversity, and he had the deep conviction that from the many groups in a pluralistic society, a stronger nation — and a better democracy — would emerge. It would take more than 200 hundred years for his principle to be applied more broadly to diverse groups by race, gender and class, but he had the basic modern democratic idea.

While our modern nation has done a fairly good job of fleshing out Madison's democratic principle to be more socially inclusive, we have actually grown worse with a central core principle of democracy: the participation of the average citizen.

It is clearly a sentimental abstraction to say that "every vote counts," when dealing with such large numbers — a hundred million votes in the last presidential election. But just as clearly, votes grow in importance in the aggregate; and they begin to feel important with the political participation that can build momentum starting with any position of political power.

Madison could not have anticipated the immense engines of politics in mass culture that have worked to undercut that participation and to deflate almost every avenue of political power but the most moneyed and the best connected to established political authorities.

As each voter becomes a commodity to be studied, assessed for his or her likelihood to show up, and if possible bought — not with cash, but with advertising to purchase people's imaginations — that individual voter feels less and less personally significant. Technically, each vote still counts, but voters can be left with the feeling they are viewed like a product for sale.

Few people mind this in their economic lives. Large corporations seem to increase efficiencies, keep prices lower and increase the varieties of stuff in stock. Not many notice the down sides of reduced quality of life and, yes, less participation of the consumer in relation to a community.

We have simply applied the corporate model to voting. And the engines of manipulation through anticipation of voter feelings are becoming stronger and bolder each year. The two major political parties are, of course, the major national political corporations, but the Republican Party has been the more adept and aggressive in implementing the corporate strategy.

Republicans have adopted a number of methods to gain more power by relying on even less participation from voters. Five years ago, Congressional Republicans sought impeachment of an elected president who had clearly committed gross immorality, but not high crimes. In 2000, a Republican court chose a Republican president based on disputed votes in a state run by Republicans. In Texas this year, Republican Majority Leader Tom DeLay has attempted to ensure a larger Republican congressional delegation from his home state of Texas by redoing the last reapportionment. And in California, we are witnessing an attempt to recall an elected governor not for misbehavior, but for unpopularity.

The Democrats have also been involved in extra-electoral maneuvering. Witness the court order in New Jersey that allowed Democrat Frank Lautenberg to step in for the embarrassed Robert Torricelli even

after the deadlines for such a change had passed during the 2002 campaign season.

Republicans of the last generation, dominated by the more conservative, righteous wing of the party, have thrown themselves into this bypassing of the messy, participatory parts of democracy because they are completely comfortable with the power of corporations in contemporary culture.

For the inner circle, it is a frank recognition of the centers of power in our time. For many out of power, there is more than a little deference for the aristocracy of our time. In addition, countless others who support the powers of the right wing tend not to look past the mouse ears on the Walt Disney Corporation or the country look of Cracker Barrel when they look at corporate giants. There is a sheen of sentimentality and down-home country patriotism that surrounds the raw power and immensity of corporations. Currently, the ascendant, conservative wing of the Republican Party is comfortable with both. Unfortunately, the corporate comfort zone doesn't leave much room for participatory democracy.

Campaign finance reform offers hope for change by reducing the vast abundance of cash available to campaigners; but the dynamic underneath the money will still be there as long as most people are willing to trade their participation for consumption.

In shopping, a glossy ad does not mean it is a good product or right for you. The same is true in politics. Even a money-drenched campaign would get nowhere if citizens would really participate and make choices based on their own understanding and their own real interests, not acquiescing to a political entity that plays on voters' emotions and which is ready to trip-wire voters into serving the corporate interest.

So please do go ahead and vote on Tuesday and each election day. But as you do, make it your own.