Forum

Instant Political Reform: A Recipe for Democracy's Demise

What if we held an election and no one voted? How about organizing a fundraiser and no one contributes? Or, a Congressman plans a town meeting and no one attends?

Based on recent news reports and studies suggesting negative advertising and muck-racking journalism cause the public to tune-out and turn-off to politics, America's civic culture is on life support. And while the exaggerated indifference to politics suggested above has not occurred, many want to address this dangerous trend.

Unfortunately, as is often the case with political reform, Congress appears poised to address the problem with reforms that may exacerbate rather than improve the situation. Political reform ideas litter today's electoral landscape, cropping up faster than the latest microwaveable lean cuisine. Embracing these ideas, some candidates and pundits try to position themselves more "outside" than the next, hoping to deliver the final nail in the coffin of "politics as usual" and maybe win an election along the way.

Among the most popular in the outsider's arsenal are campaign finance reform, term limits and reigning in lobbyists, easy quick fixes representing Ben-Gay for the soreness in the body politic.

Yet never have so few proposals done so much to discourage democratic participation by so many. With apologies to Winston Churchill, that's the best way to describe the unintended negative consequences produced by these "reforms."

All the popular political reform ideas have one thing in common: They're quick fix proposals that discourage citizen participation in politics, ultimately making our system of government less effective. Substituting government solutions for legitimate and necessary personal political responsibility, these proposals minimize the need and incentive for individuals to play a part in the drama of democracy and instead provide further incentives to tune-out. Like most quick fixes, they embody a certain level of superficial attractiveness, but ultimately they will backfire.

Consider term limits. The arguments for and against have been articulated and outlined in much greater detail in analyses aimed specifically at the reform idea. Yet few have considered the impact of term limits on public participation in politics. Term limits represent an almost total abrogation of personal political responsibility to the state. Why vote or volunteer or even care about electoral politics if the "system" disposes elected officials automatically after a set number of years. Recent polls reveal most citizens can't even name who represents them in the Senate or the House of Representatives. So why bother to find out if your Representative or Senator is a short timer anyway? Term limits provide yet another excuse to ignore politics.

Campaign finance reform, especially public financing of elections and the abolition of PACs, will produce a similar outcome. Persons contributing financially, either directly to a candidate, to a party organization, or a PAC, represent the most politically aware, interested, and active participants in the electoral process. Responsible reform should look for ways to increase the number of active, engaged and interested participants in the political process, not reduce it. Allowing individuals to financially invest in the political process through a candidate, a political party, or in their company or union's political involvement through a PAC are among the best ways to encourage more, rather than less, involvement in the electoral process and public policy.

Political parties today no longer play as dominant a role in providing basic information about electoral politics and public policy issues for voters as in years past. Citizens today receive information on these issues from a plethora of sources. For a company's management or union workers, PACs serve as an effective communication channel, analyzing how candidates or elected officials represent the interests of the employee and the firm.

Through newsletters, briefings and other communications from the PAC, a company's employees receive important information concerning the electoral process. Union and management PACs also encourage political participation through financial contributions and other modes of electoral involvement.

On a collective basis, these PAC activities represent legitimate and important mortar in building a better democracy. Mindlessly removing them in the name of some misguided reform could cause the entire infrastructure to crumble.

Bashing lobbyists is another favorite "outsider" pastime. Yet, like the other quick fix reforms, curbing lobbyists' involvement in the policy process sounds good on the surface, but also has anti-democratic consequences.

Lobbyists represent groups and interests with a legitimate role in the governing process. Teachers, doctors, senior citizens, oil companies, environmental activists, union members, small business owners (the list could go on) all should have representation in the policy process. Every American can realize representation by one or more of these groups. Lobbyists represent the legitimate interests of Americans attempting to have their voices heard in Washington. Political reform and lobby reform should

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attempt to encourage more rather than less participation of organized citizens expressing collective views. Lobbyists help facilitate that involvement.

During the remainder of this year and as the election approaches, discussion of political reform will undoubtedly continue in the Congress and in the press. Let's reject quick fix solutions that sound good on bumper stickers but minimize democratic participation. Sound reforms should encourage the maximum amount of political participation by the maximum number of people. Step off your soapboxes for a moment, reformers, and look for way to encourage participation at the ballot box.

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More "Bad News, Period"

The March 1996 issue of *PS* was particularly interesting for its focus on the media and politics. Although I have not seen any correspondence published in *PS* recently, I thought I would nevertheless make a few remarks on the thoughtful piece by Thomas E. Patterson on "Bad News, Period." To sum up my reaction, I think that Patterson is correct in his conclusion that the media betray a bias against all politicians, but he does not go far enough. For if one reflects on the significance of the media's hostility to politics and politicians, we see that it is an untenable and unstable position that must ultimately come to rest, either in rejecting democracy or in picking a side despite the demands of "objectivity." Whatever the outcome, one can be sure that the news media will not become staunch defenders of the American Constitution.

Let me attempt to explain why this is so. However accurate it may be to characterize the media's attitude as one of "[i]ngrained cynicism" or a "low opinion of politics and politicians (p. 17), we need to know why such an attitude exists, for in this way we may well see the ultimate consequence. Journalists are taught to regard political thought as mere "opinion," a point of view not unique to journalism schools but one which has held authority for many years in the social sciences, including political science. Based on this non-critical but merely habitual embrace of "objectivity," journalists and social scientists see political opinions as mere rationalizations of fundamental drives or passions (economic, psychological or racial) or as a reflection of the historical situation of the political actors. Given this mindset (and that seems a particularly apt term for a position held uncritically), it is not only not surprising but thoroughly predictable that both journalists and social scientists should have a cynical or low opinion of politics and politicians. The only questions are where and when these consequences become manifest in both groups.

As one who was a journalist first and a political scientist second, I well remember the whole attitude which pervades the journalistic profession. Patterson's remarks on the "attack journalism" (p. 18) which is not merely attracted by fights but actually stages them, is not only well-ingrained but actually journalism's response to the inadequacies of its own "objective" standards. For if one is merely reporting the news, which is to say, the words and deeds of political actors, one is entirely at the mercy of the actors. Because journalists knew that their methodology was no obstacle to their being "used" by politicians (Sen. Joseph McCarthy was a particularly effective manipulator of the press—at least for a time), they attempted to escape this difficulty by engaging in "interpretative" or "investigative" journalism, which would enable them to give their audiences a wider context for the day's news. But as Patterson makes clear, the practical result was that journalists could pit politicians against each other, allegedly for the sake of "balance," but actually to promote the controversy that makes journalism more exciting and journalists more a part of the action. The spectacle of unending political conflict indeed does nothing to promote the well-being of the nation as the citizens come to believe that politicians fight continually but accomplish little or nothing. This does indeed "rob political leaders of the public confidence that is required to govern effectively." (p. 19) But it still leaves us unsure of the extent to which journalists are responsible.

What may be more fundamental than the media's continued animus against politics and politicians is the so-called "objectivity" which governs social science no less than the media. In both cases, a bias against politics here and now is a bias against the politics established by the U.S. Constitution. That is, if our politics is too corrupt to warrant taking seriously, than our Constitution is itself indefensible, for it is the cause. Media and academic hostility to our politics is hostility to our Constitution. The longer this attitude is indulged, the more dangerous it is to the preservation of the republican form of government established by the Constitution, including "the slow deliberation and negotiation that mark the work of representative institutions . . . in a political system based on an elaborate system of checks and balances that is designed to foster compromise and deliberation" (p. 19). If the system is nevertheless maintained by what the late Leo Strauss called "dull and stale habit," that is not much comfort, for a set of clear and unshakable convictions (for example, "all men are created equal") is also necessary. This is precisely what both social science and journalism reject, in the name of "value-free" or "politics-free" neutrality.

But the same premise of media hostility or at best indifference to the structure or principles of our politics, could also lead to partisanship in the media. It is one thing for the media to subject President Clinton to a "feeding frenzy" during his first two years in office when his party controls both houses of Congress; it is different story altogether now that Republicans are in control and threaten to control all three elective branches. Those "journalists, who tend to have liberal beliefs," (p. 19) may have been "the unwitting handmaiden of the conservatives" up until the 1994 congressional elec-

tions, but they have no reason to be any longer. Patterson showed in his book *Out of Order* that the media's hostility to President Bush in 1992 was an advantage for challenger Bill Clinton, so we should not be surprised if they cut the President some slack in the 1996 campaign.

Finally, the liberal media's hostility to politics may be of a piece with liberalism's hostility to the original character of the Constitution. Liberalism's passion for policies of income redistribution and group rights may have found some popular favor (certainly in the past, but the future is in doubt), but that leaves aside the question of their compatibility with the Constitution. Neither the Founders nor several generations of statesman favored what is today called "big government," with the attendant bureaucratic procedures, rule by "experts," and "objective," allegedly "non-partisan," journalism. The authority of the Constitution arises not only from its admirable procedures, but from the first principles which underlie the system. Liberalism and hostility to democratic politics, then, go together. Liberalism exalts social engineering over government by consent of the governed, increasingly regarding democratic politics as a painful nuisance. The necessary condition for removing this obstacle is stigmatizing it.

In sum, media hostility to politics arises from that very liberalism which is erroneously regarded merely as the personal opinion of journalists. The "big government" liberalism of both journalists and non-journalists is as hostile to the Constitution as the media's manifest hostility. They proceed from a common cause.

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Verification/Replication: A Graduate Student's Perspective

Zhiyue Bo's concerns (1995, 663) regarding the possibility of graduate students being more severely exploited if professor King's "verification/replication" proposals were to be adopted are appreciated, but I do not think that they are necessarily that significant in deciding whether a verification/replication policy should be adopted. Professor Bo's concerns are appreciated because graduate students are certainly susceptible to exploitation, and anything that might help make the potential exploitation of graduate students less likely is appreciated.

On the other hand, graduate students are, by the very nature of their rank within academia, in a dependent position that would not be made any better or worse by the adoption of a verification/replication standard. As graduate students, our task is to learn as much from our mentoring professors as possible before going on to the next level. In reality this often involves a reciprocal exploitative relationship, especially for research assistants. Graduate students often do the "grunt work" of research projects such as collecting and analyzing the data. More often than not, the most thanks they get is a mention in footnote number one. But in reality, graduate students gain invaluable experience by working closely with a mentor on a research project. The two cases that professor Bo cites are certainly unacceptable instances of graduate student exploitation, but I would hope that cases like those are rare rather than normal.

As a graduate student, I find much promise in professor King's proposal. In fact, graduate students could stand to benefit if verification/replication standards were to be established. During our four or five (or more!) years of graduate training, we are supposed to be learning, among other things, solid research skills. As with most other aspects of life, learning something real well involves a lot of trial and error, and graduate students in political science have it no different. Much of our research trial and error generally takes place in the form of seminar papers, where we commonly try to replicate either all or part of another scholar's published research. The problem often arises, especially for quantitative work, that replication is difficult either because of incomplete information found in the study being replicated or an inability to gather all of the same or similar data in time to finish the paper by the end of the semester/quarter.

If verification/replication standards were to be established such that a replication data set could be easily retrieved from an archive such as the Public Affairs Video Archive (PAVA) at Purdue University or the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan, graduate students would stand to benefit as much if not more than anyone because it could make our ability to replicate much more meaningful. Replication is, as professor King notes in his proposal (1995, 447) an effective teaching tool, and verification/replication standards that would make data more easily available can only enhance the benefits to graduate students from replicating.

Professor Bo's concerns are important and I am not meaning to simply brush them aside; however a few instances where graduate students have been rather severely exploited should not be used as an excuse to derail a good proposal. The two instances that professor Bo mentions are examples of perhaps ethical violations that should be addressed in that context.

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Quentin Kidd
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An Outside Look

A new initiative is needed in higher education.

That new initiative involves professors getting out of the classroom and into summer jobs other than teaching. It means working at some business, agency, or center where a

college teacher can listen and observe, offer ideas, happen upon a topic for research, and, above all, bring back to the classroom current knowledge for lectures and labs.

This initiative has to come from within. I am a full professor and have been a department chair and fulltime journalists. Bur foremost, I am a teacher. I owe it to my students to learn as much as I can about my field, rather than to kick up my heels and let a summer go by and all I do is produce carbon dioxide.

For the past several summers, I've worked at newspapers: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Argus Leader* in Sioux Falls, S.D., *The Palm Beach Post* in West Palm Beach, Fla., and *The San Diego Tribune*. Work as a copy editor, writing coach, reporter, and editorial writers allows me to stay updated as computer-assisted reporting, electronic newspaper libraries, digital photography, and other innovations have changed newspapers forever. The advancements also change the way we must teach.

To get these jobs is no easy task. You have to approach them at times with an almost volunteer spirit since compensation may only meet expenses. But I have been repaid many times over as my students benefit from my newly gained knowledge. For me, working in the industry is a form of renewal that keeps me young.

But what about teachers of political science? Where would they go? Political science professors could learn plenty "riding shotgun" with a lobbyist rather than conducting yet another mail survey of lobbyists. Such a case study might enable a political science professor to bring fresh insights back to the classroom.

This idea is not much different than encouraging students to do summer internships. In a class I recently taught, a student had done an internship with the Republican National Committee in Washington, D.C. The same student was considering applying for a White House internship. Students serve as Congressional interns and acquire an appreciation for our federal government that they can get nowhere else.

To make this initiative work, an overhaul in the way colleges and universities go about awarding tenure and promotion would be essential. Tenure and promotion committees and the academic hierarchy would need to rethink what is important in a university.

What's most important at a time when state legislatures, business and industry, donors and parents are demanding accountability from colleges is that professors keep current with developments in their field. Try as they might, most professors are constantly playing catchup.

But what better way to catch up than to work closely with those in industry who are truly the pacemakers and trendsetters? There's another benefit. Academics would establish ties with business, public agencies, and other sectors that could contribute to increased understanding, goodwill, and even dollars donated to higher education.

All too many professors cloister themselves, not even interacting with colleagues across campus. To overcome institutional inertia of doing business as usually is as great a challenge as getting professors to work outside the protective cocoon known as the classroom. But it must be done to make a college degree worth what it was when I earned my first one in 1966. Professors need to get knowledge firsthand and come back to the classroom carrying this kind of educational currency.

With my summer job I have brought back classroom handouts, ideas for practical and scholarly research, and an attitude that these jobs can transform a classroom into a living laboratory of new ideas. For those reason, I say let the initiative begin!

Don Sneed
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Measuring the "Best"

Given that *PS* devoted almost half of the editorial content of the June issue to departmental rankings, I hope you will open up discussion on how to make them more useful to the real intended beneficiaries and constituents of political science departments—the public (U.S. and other populations), organizations and populations which are the subject of political science study, and future generations—rather than just to those who make or plan to make their careers as professional political scientists.

Frankly, I found it embarrassing that the discipline would give such prominence to measures used to describe itself that it would certainly wish to challenge if they were used to measure any other form of social behavior.

Although there were some efforts to include quantifiable measures in the analysis, there were no attempts to generate more independent or "objective" measures of quality that would tie the activities of political science departments to some public or social purpose; perhaps providing better models of human activity that have predictive value or policy impact, perhaps helping to promote rights or equity, or perhaps even succeeding in transferring measurable skills in what I would presume is the pedagogical mission of a university department.

All of the measures included in the study—quantity of publications and graduated scholars, for example—are merely proxies for subjective valuations of political scientists by political scientists, rather than attempts to tie these measures to any real output or objectives. Other evaluations, such as "visibility" and "effectiveness" were left undefined; grounded on no real impact at all other than effect on practitioners. Indeed, all of the measures used are multi-colinear; no better than asking a Medieval Church to rank its bishops for "visibility" and "effectiveness."

Perhaps such evaluations are reflective of the continuing legacy of the Cold War's perversion of the discipline, in which ideology and conformity were the dominant concern, and empirical social science, serving the diverse public and its many objectives were given a back seat.

Isn't it time for us to go back to basics and redefine what the "best" is on the basis of the benefits that

social science and university education can and should convey? Or is this still too hot and impermissible a topic for us as political "scientists" and "educators"?

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Fifty Acres and a Mule, and Other Unfulfilled Promises

I propose that the placement records of political science departments be considered in National Research Council ranking of research-doctorate programs. Their current study, reprinted in the December, 1995 issue of *PS*, ranks individual departments nationally on the bases of faculty scholarship and quality of graduate-level training. Professors and their departments, however, are not evaluated on the number of doctoral students for whom they find employment. Attention to such a record in political science is warranted because of the difficulties new Ph.D.s face in finding employment, particularly teaching positions for which they are specifically trained.

As most of us have surely observed, many new Ph.D.s (and not just in political science) are either forced to settle for temporary teaching appointments, migrating from a one-year position to one-year position, or find income and additional education by enrolling in post-doctoral programs. Some of us may have also witnessed Ph.D.s who, after several years of effort, give up on academia and then also face difficulty in finding non-academic employment. They either do not have the relevant skills and work experience or their advisors know very little about the job market outside of academia and cannot help them.

What appears to go unnoticed in these rankings is that those who spend so much time and effort to receive a Ph.D. degree do not do so for the love of knowledge alone. If learning was their only goal many could perhaps achieve that on their own without spending tens of thousands of dollars. A Ph.D., however, is needed in order to gain access into the academic world. Yet, such an exclusive club is often unable to provide employment for many newcomers. Hence graduates linger, spending the most productive years of their lives seeking full-time employment.

While faculty research is certainly important, the future of doctoral students should be equally valued. This means that the new Ph.D.s deserve more than their advisors' expressions of bewilderment at their inability to find a teaching position. What they need is that their advisors work hard to help them find appropriate employment. Such a task may require the faculty to work as hard as they do on their research projects on finding their students employment, given the depressed teaching market and the general lack of Ph.D.s' training and experience outside of academic world. In this endeavor the American Political Science Association (APSA) can also help by acknowledging the poor teaching market and include those who have given up looking for academic positions in its annual placement tallies. Similarly, APSA can assist graduate students to find non-academic jobs by stopping the sale of its out-dated publications and commission new studies based on the realities of mid 1990s.

I would like to think that most political scientists agree with me that political science departments are not created for the sole purpose of faculty research. They are also places where the future generation of political scientists are trained. A study that provides ranking of research departments on the basis of their placement record is invaluable to potential graduate students. They should be given the opportunity to choose a department that will invest as much in their future as they will invest in their graduate studies. Such a study can also provide information on reasons for placement success of certain departments that can be helpful to faculty and administrators in departments with less than desirable placement record.

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