
The Voluntaryist

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"If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself."

December 1997

Election Day: A Means of State Control

By Robert Weissberg

Interpreting elections is a national spectator sport, offering as many "meanings" as there are board-certified spin doctors. Nevertheless, all of these disparate revelations, insights, and brilliant interpretations share a common, unthinking vision: elections, despite their divisive, contentious character, exist to facilitate citizen power over government. Whether ineptly or adeptly, honestly or dishonestly, government is supposed to be subjugated via mass electoral participation. This is, it might be said, The Great Democratic Belief of Popular Sovereignty.

Less understood, though hardly less significant, is that control flows the opposite way: elections permit government's effective management of its own citizens. The modern state's authority, its vast extractive capacity, its ability to wage war, its ever-growing power to regulate our lives, requires constant reinvigoration via the ballot box. Moreover, and even less obvious, properly administered elections promote cohesiveness, not acrimonious division. Indeed, this periodic reaffirmation of the political covenant may be elections' paramount purpose, relegating the actual choice among Tweedledee, Tweedledum candidates to mere historical details. Like the atmosphere, this phenomenon appears nearly invisible, escaping both popular attention and scrutiny from talking-head television pundits. Even scholars, those investigating civic matters of profound obscurity, with few exceptions (particularly my former colleague, Ben Ginsberg) are neglectful. Put succinctly, marching citizens off to vote—independent of their choice—is a form of conscription to the political status quo. Election day, like Christmas or Yom Kippur, is the high holiday, a day of homage and reaffirmation, in the creed of the modern state.

Those at the Constitutional Convention well understood this conscriptive function. Though the Founders are now fashionably branded as unrepresentative elitists who distrusted the downtrodden masses and oppressed women and toilers of color, what they never doubted was the political usefulness of elections. James Wilson and Elbridge Gerry openly acknowledged that a vigorous federal government required extensive popular consent, freely given by the ballot. Voters could not, and should not, guide policy, but without periodic popular authorization, how could the national government efficiently col-

lect taxes, compel obedience to its laws, solicit military recruits or gain loyalty? This is what "no taxation without representation" is all about: the ritual of consent. Elections, however tumultuous or corrupt, bestowed legitimacy far better and more cheaply than brute force, bribery, appeals to divine right, or any alternative. Opposition to the direct elections of senators, predictably, arose from state sovereignty advocates—allowing citizens to vote for such a prominent national office could only enhance centralism.

Elections as a means of state aggrandizement, not popular control of government, was clearly grasped during the 19th century's march toward universal suffrage. Today's liberal vision of common folk clamoring "empowerment" via the vote is much overdrawn; extension of the suffrage was often "topdown." The modern, centralized bureaucratic state and plebiscitary elections are, by necessity, intimately connected. To Napoleon III and Bismark the freshly enfranchised voter was the compliant participant in their push toward unified state authority. Casting the national ballot liberated ordinary citizens from the influences of competitors—the church, provincial notables, kinfolk, and champions of localism. Elections soon became essential ceremonies of national civic induction, a process ever-further extended as wars evolved into expensive million-man national crusades.

Modern dictatorships are especially taken with elections, typically combined with some form of compulsory voting, as means of state domination. The Soviet Union's notorious single-party elections with 99+ percent turnout are the paradigmatic but hardly unique example. Many African nations boast of near unanimous turnout to endorse their beloved kleptocratic leader. The Pinochet government of Chile even went so far as to make nonvoting punishable by three months in prison and a \$150 fine. While it is tempting to dismiss such choice-less, forced-march elections as shams, the investment of precious state funds and bureaucratic effort confirms that elections are far more than mechanisms of citizen control of government.

In general, the electoral process, whether in a democracy or a dictatorship, performs this citizen domestication function in various ways, but let us examine here only three mechanisms. To be sure, the connection between state aggrandizement and elections is not guaranteed, and much can go astray. Nevertheless, over time the two go together. The first mechanism might be called psychological co-optation

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Potpourri from the Editor's Desk

No. 1 "One Nation Under Bigger Government"

The turmoil of Reconstruction was only the Civil War's most visible legacy. The war had dramatically altered American society and institutions. The South of course would never be the same, but the transformation of the North was also profound and permanent. The national government that emerged victorious from the conflict dwarfed in power and size the minimal Jacksonian State that had commenced the war. The number of civilians in federal employ swelled almost fivefold. A distant administration that had little contact with its citizens had been transformed into an overbearing bureaucracy that intruded into daily life with taxes, drafts, surveillance, subsidies, and regulations. Central government spending had soared from less than 2 percent of the economy's total output to well over 20 percent in 1865, approximately what the central government spends today. It is hard to decide from which angle that statistic is more astounding: that government spending rose from such infinitesimal lows to today's heights in four years, or that today federal authorities regularly spend during peacetime as much as they did during the country's most devastating war.

—Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, *EMANCIPATING SLAVES, ENSLAVING FREE MEN*, 1996, p. 328.

No. 2 "Foundations of the Rights and Responsibilities of Homeschooling Parents"

Some people have suggested that we try to protect parental rights and responsibilities by seeking federal or state legislation or amendments to the federal or state constitutions. However, this approach does not work. Parental rights and responsibilities in education are basic and fundamental and do not come from the government. If we allow the government to pass a law or a constitutional amendment which gives the government authority in education, we will be diminishing the rights we have indepen-

dent of the state and increasing the control the state has over our children's education.

One of the important lessons of these initiatives is that it is virtually impossible to write a law that protects parental rights in an area that is considered fundamental, such as education and health care, without first requiring that parents assume responsibility. (To be sure, parents are responsible for their children. However, they do not want or need to have the government force this responsibility on them and then check to make sure that they are doing the right thing.)

Even more serious, if the government passes legislation that requires that parents assume responsibility for their children, then parents have to demonstrate to the government that they are being responsible by acting in ways that are consistent with the beliefs, standards, and choices of those people who have the most power in our society. Therefore, the government would decide what kind of education and health care will be required, how families would be monitored to ensure that they are complying with the law, and how they will be dealt with if a government official decides that they are not complying. Legislative initiatives supposedly designed to protect parental rights actually diminish basic freedoms that are the foundations of a democratic society.

Instead of trying to get legislation passed that would supposedly protect parental rights and responsibilities, it makes much more sense and is much safer to use the basic foundations of homeschooling rights and responsibilities to reclaim and maintain them. We are much better prepared to act to reclaim and maintain our rights if we understand just how strong the foundations are. We need to remember that the right of families to choose for their children an education consistent with their principles and beliefs is fundamental. It is not a favor that is granted to us by school officials, legislatures, or other officials or agencies. People who understand the foundations of their rights and responsibilities act differently when dealing with officials than do people who think their rights are granted to them by laws and officials. We can act more straightforwardly, confidently, and effectively when we understand these foundations. We can also avoid giving the state and large institutions more control over our lives by asking them to protect us through legislation and constitutional amendments. ...

It is important that we understand that we have inalienable rights. These rights are not given to us by the state. We should not look to the state as the source of these rights, and we should not give them over to the state.

—Larry and Susan Kaseman,
HOME EDUCATION MAGAZINE,
May-June 1996, p. 14
(Box 11083, Tonasket, WA 98855).

Contra Gradualism

By Wendy McElroy

It is 1858 and you are living in a Northern town. A man has arrived at your door with papers documenting his ownership of a runaway slave whom you are sheltering. The slave throws himself at your feet begging to stay while the slave-owner reasons with you. Being philosophically inclined, he comments on the political and social necessity of preserving slavery for the time being. He assures you he is opposed to the institution, but that without it the economy of the South would shrivel and crimes of passion by blacks against whites would abound. Slavery must be phased out. After this particular slave has learned a trade to support himself, then he will be freed.

If you reply, "There is no moral or practical consideration that overrides this man's right to his own body," you are an abolitionist.

If you reply, "I am opposed to slavery, but the consequences of immediately ending it are disastrous; therefore, I return your slave for the transition period," you are a gradualist.

The abolition of slavery was the core issue around which libertarians of the early nineteenth century rallied. They opposed phasing it out as they would have opposed phasing out rape. Both are moral abominations on which the only proper position is immediate cessation; that is, as fast as is humanly possible. A core issue around which modern libertarians must rally is the abolition of the state, as fast as is humanly possible.

Libertarianism is the political philosophy based on the principle of nonaggression. Every human being is a self owner with inalienable rights. And gradualism is inconsistent with the moral foundation of libertarianism.

Before proceeding, it is useful to distinguish gradualism as a policy from gradualism as a fact of reality. This latter form of gradualism says that, try as you may, it takes time to implement ideas. The transition to a libertarian society would not—because it could not—occur overnight. This is the nature of temporal reality in which we live. If this is all that is meant by gradualism—if it means 'as fast as possible'—then there is no quarrel between so called 'gradualists' and 'abolitionists' within the movement.

This is not the formulation of gradualism with which abolitionists are concerned. When abolitionists say that unjust laws ought to be abolished immediately, the "ought" is a moral ought, and "immediately" means no more than as fast as possible.

Abolitionists do not deny reality; they simply insist that—as a political policy, individual rights must be given priority over all other considerations. Libertarian abolitionists of the nineteenth century realized that the cessation of slavery would take time, but their message was that the deliberate continuation of slavery as a policy could not be justified. They

demanded abolition - no "ifs," "ands," or "buts."

Those libertarians of the "ifs," "ands," or "buts" camp maintain that, in some cases, libertarianism ought to favor the gradual phasing out of unjust laws and agencies rather than pushing for immediate abolition, even if that immediate abolition is possible. A commonly cited example is the modern version of slavery—taxation. If taxes were to cease abruptly, it is claimed, the consequences upon those who have paid into social security would be calamitous. Therefore taxes must be phased out.

[For the sake of this analysis, I will label the foregoing position as "explicit" gradualism and introduce the concept of "implicit" gradualism later.]

The defining aspect of explicit gradualism is the answer it gives to the key question: Could it ever be too soon to eliminate an unjust law or agency? The abolitionist gives an unqualified "no." If the gradualist does not answer "yes" he answers "maybe." Taxation is theft but some people might starve if it ceases abruptly. (Please note that I am not denigrating concern for starving people, but merely rejecting the use of force—and particularly governmental force—to solve this problem.)

Here the explicit gradualist is not denying that taxation violates rights; he is claiming that there is a "social good" which has higher priority than individual rights. Since he cannot justify coercion with reference to freedom itself (unless the word is radically redefined), he justifies the willful continuation of theft by posing a dilemma of some kind. Abolition of government laws would result in social chaos; thus, we need a "transition" period during which deliberate rights violations would continue.

The myth of the transition period accomplishes at least two things. It converts libertarianism from a personal philosophy and obligation that should be consistently lived on a day-to-day basis into a symbolic light at the end of a tunnel. Thus, libertarians might have to advocate and participate in the violation of rights in order to humanely achieve a society where no compromise of rights is tolerated. To the insightful Gandhi objection that, "The means are the ends in progress," the explicit gradualist might well answer with a quote from Lenin: "You have to break a few eggs to make an omelette." Is it necessary to point out that "eggs" is a metaphor for "heads"?

The second accomplishment is a sleight of hand. By posing the transition period, gradualism is suddenly shifted into a strategic rather than a moral question. Gradualism is simply a matter of getting from here to there.

Abolitionists answer: on the contrary. Gradualism is a matter of whether libertarians will sanction the violation of rights as a strategy. As a libertarian, it is not within your range of discretion to deliberately violate the rights of any person in any case. It is forbidden, without qualification, by the fundamental principle of the philosophy. You may decide to

aggress anyway, but you cannot aggress in the name of libertarian theory. Logic forbids you that option.

The only possible avenue of escape from this contradiction is to compromise the non-aggression principle by watering it down to read: "The initiation of force, is wrong except when it is necessary to preserve "social order, or ... when it is politically expedient, or... when a libertarian politician says so."

If the non-aggression principle is given priority then the only libertarian approach to unjust laws and agencies is that they must be abolished as soon as is humanly possible; that is, abolitionism.

Other problems with explicit gradualism are worth mentioning. For those who favor libertarian politicians (I do not) it is important to have a standard by which to judge the effectiveness and sincerity of libertarian office-holders. If, at the end of four years, your politician has accomplished little, he can always contend, "The time was not ripe." Since gradualism has no objective standards, it is a blank check for inactivity and compromise.

A more fundamental problem is the "reductio ad absurdum" of gradualism. Once you admit the principle of subordinating rights to a social good, there is no way to draw the line. If my rights are violated by libertarians to compensate others for injustice (not receiving social security, for example), why should the same principle not be applied to me? Surely that injustice done to me should be rectified by violating the rights of the coming generation. This vicious, antilibertarian doctrine fosters an infinite regress of injustice. As William Lloyd Garrison expressed it, "Gradualism in theory is perpetuity in practice."

The only way to stop injustice is to stop injustice. Nevertheless, gradualists might reply that a minimal tax would be a small injustice compared to the greater one of depriving old people of social security. But it is not clear what standard is being used here. Are we to trust a "gut" reaction that it is better for many people to be deprived of a little than for few to be deprived of a great deal? Even if one could be judged less unjust, trying to fit either one into a libertarian framework would be pounding a square peg of injustice into the round hole of liberty. And if it could be demonstrated that I have had more stolen from me through taxation than have many of those on social security, could they be forced to compensate me for that greater injustice? The dismal fact is that everyone has had money stolen by the government; the goal of libertarianism is to end that process, not to redirect it.

Let me now introduce the concept of "implicit" gradualism, which uses a different approach. The implicit gradualist might well agree with everything written up to this point, but he would advocate gradualism with regard to spreading libertarian ideas. Thus, libertarian writers and speakers should present issues on a piecemeal basis without ever stating the goal of abolition or the wider libertarian con-

text. Thus, a libertarian should call for decreased taxation without revealing the goal of no taxation. "Taxation is theft" is replaced with a statement that you "have the right to keep more of what you earn."

This is gradualism by concealment—a concealment that is justified as a strategic maneuver to facilitate agreement. After all, if we unload the entire libertarian ideology onto people, they will shrink from its radicalism. They are not ready to hear abstract discussions of justice and natural rights. The implicit gradualists may swear—in private to fellow libertarians—that they favor abolitionism, but they are unwilling to be publicly honest about it.

It is important to point out that it is indeed sometimes inappropriate to bring up the wider framework of libertarianism. In discussing drugs, for example, it is probably inappropriate to divert the conversation in order to show how self-ownership also applies to abortion or labor reform. This is different in kind, however, from actively avoiding the fundamental principles ... of refusing to extend them when they are appropriate. And it is also different from misstating a libertarian position to dull its radical edge.

This policy of calculated misstatement is one of the most unpleasant contributions that electoral politics has made to libertarian theory. Unlike explicit gradualism, however, implicit gradualism does not violate rights. It is more a matter of personal integrity and strategy. It is simply lying by omission.

In defense of such lying it must be admitted that lying is sometimes nonaggressive. I contend, however, that personal integrity usually demands that the full truth be given, and that lying is an abysmally poor strategy.

Strategically, the first question to consider is whether or not there is a distinctively libertarian point of view to political issues. Libertarianism consists of more than advocating certain repeals and reform; it consists of advocating them for a specific reason. Individual political reforms come with no ideological tag identifying them as libertarian, socialist, conservative or liberal. Both conservatives and libertarians attack big government and taxes. Both liberals and libertarians call for the end of military conscription. The point is that unless a libertarian gives the reason for a specific proposal, there is nothing intrinsically libertarian about it.

If, however, he stands up and states, "I oppose all taxation as theft and support any reduction of taxes as a step toward that end," then his proposal has a libertarian context.

Secondly, the benefits of consistency and openness must not be underrated. Once people understand and accept the principle of non-aggression, they start down the long path of applying it to specific issues and concluding that everything from roads to a court system could be handled on a voluntary basis. Communicate the ideology well and the issues will follow; the inverse is not necessarily true.

Third, gradualists claim that libertarianism is too radical to appeal to large numbers of people. But the problem here is not whether we wish to appear radical; the problem is that we are radical and don't want to admit it. At least, not publicly. The issue is whether our radicalism will be viewed as a strongpoint or as a political idiot cousin to be locked in the attic and not discussed.

My final objection is that I suspect many implicit gradualists are simply confessing their inability to communicate radical, abstract ideas well and then making a strategy out of this failure. The enormous appeal and influence of Ayn Rand proves that radical ideas can be presented reasonably and effectively. They can be presented with passion, humor, understatement, allegory, compassion and anger. The range of presentation is as endless as the personalities of those who espouse the principles.

The alternative to a fanatic, railing abolitionist is not a wishy-washy, evasive gradualist. It is a reasoned, knowledgeable abolitionist who communicates radical ideas effectively.

If libertarians do not present clear and explicit libertarian ideas, who will? These ideas may be accepted or rejected, but they will live or die on the basis of what they are instead of what they are not. It would be tragic if the one consistent voice for freedom in our time did not have enough confidence to speak up without apology. ▣

Letter to the Editor: "Evolution of a Voluntaryist"

Dear Carl,

I really appreciate this opportunity to correspond with you! Of course you know that people with beliefs like ours are considered the Ultimate Radicals and I often experience a sense of isolation, even among friends, because the gulf between my beliefs and theirs simply cannot be bridged. Even when we discuss issues [which is often], our conversations become a game of Devil's Advocate; no matter how sound my logic, how morally true my arguments, there seems to be a wall up in their minds that prevents them from giving any serious thought to the notion that Government by its very nature is destructive and immoral.

I found your web page; really enjoyed your article about the mails. I've also found segments of Lysander Spooner's NO TREASON on the web, which are incredibly persuasive, moral and practical (The Constitution of No Authority, especially, is incredible). Since my last letter to you I've read FOR A NEW LIBERTY and also DISCOVERY OF FREEDOM, by Rose Wilder Lane. I had been teetering on the edge of "anarcho-capitalism" when I wrote to you last, and Rothbard's book, coupled with the issues of THE VOLUNTARYIST you sent, kicked me right over. The transformation has given me a surprising sense of

peace, as it seems to be my natural inclination, which I'd never been able to articulate before.

A little about myself: I was raised to be a good liberal, and chanted the mantra "Regulate, Redistribute" until I was pregnant and planning a home birth. I was shocked to discover that midwives had been "taken in" at gun point, had their records seized, and been incinerated for "practicing medicine without a license." From there I discovered vaccination legislation, homeschooling regulation, and other controls which I knew instinctively were not in the sphere of "legitimate" State interference. From there I became your standard American constitutionalist, Restore the Constitution, Restore Liberty, etc. I read voraciously, both extremist patriot literature and more scholarly studies of American History, and while I knew that a return to Constitutional principles would certainly be infinitely preferable to what we have today, to me it seemed that Constitutional limits on government were not enough. I was especially annoyed each time I heard the rallying cry "State's Rights!", for to my mind, the state had no more right to control an individual than the feds. But nothing I read seemed to hit the proverbial nail on the head, including mainstream Libertarian Party type literature. When I read the John Singer article in JOURNAL OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION, the name "Voluntaryist" struck me as something important, and the rest is history.

I still subscribe to several patriot publications, with THE NEW AMERICAN being my favorite, but I have released my fantasy of America Restored as "the answer," which has not been very difficult. I'd always had nagging doubts about the reality of American Liberty (apart from slavery) at any point in history, as I'd read court cases and quotes from very early on which struck me as "not quite right". I just didn't know there was, or could be, anything MORE right. But an "anarcho-capitalist" friend put it to me quite well one night. He said something like, "If we want to avoid the Ultimate Totalitarian State, a world State, we cannot merely rethink government, we must exist without it!" And that made perfect sense to me. It seemed that just as a baby MUST grow into an adult (unless it dies), the nature of the State is always to increase its own power, until it becomes the Ultimate Authority, replacing not only all national governments, but also the Creator, the ONLY real nonpolitical authority which exists.

—A Grateful Subscriber ▣

"...if the current government were completely overthrown, the present American slave mentality would only erect another system of slavery."

—Franklin Sanders, THE MONEY-CHANGER, October 1994, pp. 3-4.

Election Day: A Means of State Control

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via participation: I take part, cast my vote, therefore I am implicated. All of us have been "victims" of this technique beginning, no doubt, as children. Recall, for example, when mom wished your acquiescence to visit hated Aunt Nelly. Despotically demanding compliance, though possible in principle, was too costly. Instead, mom "democratically" discussed alternatives with you, including cleaning house or going to the ballet. Given such choices, you "freely" opted for visiting Nelly, and your subsequent complaints were easily met with "you freely decided."

Such co-optive manipulation extends beyond devious parenting; it is the essence of modern management psychology. Beginning in the 1920s, industrial psychologists realized that "worker involvement" [usually] gained cooperation, especially when confronting unpleasant choices. Let workers conspicuously offer their "input" and they will be far more malleable. Internal "selling" to oneself flows from public choice. Personal participation need not even occur—it is the formal opportunity to add one's two cents, or the involvement of others, that is important. Provided executives define the range of options and control decision-making rules, this "worker empowerment" benefits, not subverts, management. That manipulative inclusion can be labeled "democratic" and "enlightened" and flatters "worker insight" is wonderful public-relations icing on the cake.

This process applies equally to elections. Recall the 1968 presidential contest—a highly divisive three-way race of Hubert Humphrey, Richard Nixon, and George Wallace in which the winner failed to gain a popular majority. Nevertheless, despite all the divisiveness, Ben Ginsberg and I discovered that views of national government, its responsiveness and concern for citizens, became more favorable following the election among voters than among nonvoters. This was also true among those choosing losing candidates. Involvement transcended and overpowered the disappointment of losing. Even a nasty, somewhat inconclusive campaign "juiced" citizen support for government. The pattern is not unique—the election ceremony improves the popularity of leaders and institutions regardless of voting choice.

Elections are also exercises in "Little Leagueism" to help prop up the political status quo. That is, potentially dangerous malcontents are involved in safe, organized activity under responsible adult supervision rather than off secretly playing by themselves. All things considered, better to have Lenin get out the vote, solicit funds, ponder polls, circulate petitions, or serve in Congress. This is equally true in democracies or dictatorships—regular electoral activity facilitates "conventionality" (regardless of ide-

ology) among those who might otherwise drift to the dangerous, revolutionary edge. This is especially true where bizarre groups overall constitute a relatively small minority. At a minimum, humdrum details and ceaseless busy work hardly leaves any time for sitting around a cafe plotting revolution.

Even if all potential revolutionaries are not "domesticated" via the election process, the easy availability of elections helps keep the peace. Why risk mayhem when public employment by stuffing ballot boxes is so simple? The 1960s Black Power movement is the perfect poster child. The urban guerrilla movement back then seemed imminent—the infatuation with Franz Fanon's celebration of violence and similar mumbo-jumbo rhetoric, the macho allure of automatic weapons, and the gleeful "in-your-face" public paramilitarism demeanor. Urban riots were everywhere; Newark and Detroit had become virtual garrison states. Comparisons with Northern Ireland or Lebanon were not absurd.

Nevertheless, the pedestrian seduction of public office easily overcame this intoxication with violence. The Malcolm X Democratic Club and similar entities suddenly materialized while numerous cleaned-up revolutionary agitators entered "the system" as "progressive Democrats," often occupying positions set aside for minorities. The "Black Mayor" became institutionalized. The passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, its extensions, and generous subsequent interpretations made black electoral mobilization a national government priority. The federal registrar served as the neighborhood convenience store for "selling out." Within a decade, the once-familiar "revolutionary" agitator spewing forth clichés about insurrection was a political antique. By the 1980s, it was impossible for a "take-to-the-hills" Black Power revolutionary even to think about competing with elections.

The transformation of revolutionary "Black Power" into humdrum conventionality highlights the third way elections domesticate potential disruption: tangible inducement (or bribery, in plain English) to malcontents. The "cooling out" via granting a piece of the action is a time-honored American tradition, from 19th-century populists and socialists to the 1960s antiwar movement. Entering "the system," at least in highly permeable American politics, wonderfully corrupts revolutionary ardor. At a minimum, rabble-rousers in remission must come out of hiding to collect their salary, sit in their offices, boss around subordinates, issue press releases, accept financial contributions, and, if necessary, bounce a check. If Maxine Waters (D-CA) seems like an out-of-control ballistic missile, imagine her unchecked by the obligations of high public office. As a comfortable congresswoman, she is far more constrained than if preaching the street-corner revolutionary gospel or a tenured professor with an endowed chair. Ditto for the thousands of others contemplating revolution-

ary violence but who now owe their prestige and income to elective office. Let the most ambitious attend endless dull committee meetings. The very existence of this electoral opportunity, apart from bodies enrolled, is critical—the prospect of a few well-paid prestigious sinecures, like playing for the NBA, can work wonders on millions.

This relationship between rising electoral involvement and the demise of 1960s-style revolutionary radicalism helps to explain our collective blind eye toward the extensive corruption in “minority politics.” Why do the Protectors of Democracy, from the ACLU to Common Cause, seem so unconcerned with racial gerrymandering, districts comprised largely of illegal aliens, abuses of absentee ballots, outright selling of votes and other nefarious customs when such practices bring blacks and Hispanics to office? More must be involved than just having Third World standards. The answer is simple, though seldom articulated: rotten boroughs, our versions of autonomous homelands, are part of the bargain to guarantee domestic peace. The actual outcome is irrelevant; what is important is that up-and-comers, would-be “community leaders,” are brought into “the system.” Fundamentally, shipping a few dozen would-be agitators off to legislatures or city councils, even felons and dope addicts, hardly puts the national enterprise at serious risk; consider it midnight basketball for the civic-minded. If Washington, D.C., can “survive” Marion Barry, the entire nation is bulletproof.

Elections are but one of many tools of social control and, as with all tools, mere use does not guarantee success. Critical details of administration and organization must be attended to— matters of timing, suffrage, modest enforcement of anticorruption laws, countervailing power within government, and so on. Nor do elections come with an unlimited lifetime warranty to remedy deep political problems. It is doubtful whether elections would solve much in Bosnia or Rwanda, while the jury is still out for Russia and South Africa. Elections are wondrous, circuitous devices, but not all-powerful magic.

Having described this little understood but critical purpose, what lessons can be learned? Two in particular stand out. Most evidently, if one wishes to maintain one’s ideological purity, remain uncontaminated in the quest for a higher truth, avoid elections. Those seeking to transform society via “playing the game” will inevitably be metamorphosed by the game itself. This lesson should be heeded by everyone from fundamentalist religious groups to those promoting the redistribution of political power in the United States. Purity and empowerment via elections do not mix. The loss of revolutionary zeal among the formerly faithful, an inclination toward “wheeling and dealing,” and being comfortable with petty enticements need not result from flawed character; pedestrian opportunism comes with the territory. If this seems farfetched, one only has to review our history:

virtually every splinter group, no matter how ideologically noble or distinct, that ventured into the electoral arena, has been mainstreamed and today exists only as a domesticated, digested fragment within the Democratic or Republican parties.

The surrender of purity via electoral absorption need not, despite advice to the contrary, be a particularly good deal. There are costs, and no guarantee of gain, for getting into bed with the state. You might even get a serious rash. Groups that have devoted themselves extensively to electoral achievement, especially for economic advancement, have seldom, if ever, accomplished much beyond politics itself. This has surely been the case with black infatuation with electoral success since the mid-1960s. Despite all the voting rights laws, federal court interventions, registration drives, and elected black officials, blacks as a group continue to lag behind whites on most indicators of accomplishment. In some ways, conditions have deteriorated. By contrast, Asians and Indians have made remarkable strides without any electoral empowerment. Like polo, electoral politics may be a worthwhile sport only after first becoming economically successful. How this plunge into electoral politics will play out for today’s moral issues—abortion, pornography, religion, sexuality—remains to be seen.

The second lesson is the converse: if domestication is the objective, get the would-be revolutionaries, extremists, grumblers, and malcontents enrolled. Are antigovernment militias posing a problem? Take a clue from the Motor Voter bill and allow voter registration at all firearms and survival equipment stores. Voting, even corrupt voting, should be as convenient as possible. Rig the district boundaries so that leaders must serve their time in state capitals and Washington, D.C., consorting with generous lobbyists. Make those with talent precinct captains, election judges, convention delegates, county commissioners, and paid advisors to established political parties. Within the decade the militiamen will be as threatening as an agitated American Legion post forced to give up its bingo.

In sum, as we observe the 1996 campaign, we should not be distracted by the details. Far more goes on than selecting candidates. Despite the acrimony and divisiveness, all the talk of a people freely exercising sovereignty, we are witnessing a ceremony for reinvigorating the covenant between citizen and state. All sorts of would-be troublemakers are being domesticated and brought into “the system.” Those who attempt to escape will be brought to the attention of the Department of Justice.

[Editor’s Note: The author is a professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This article first appeared in *CHRONICLES* (934 N. Main St., Rockford, IL 61103), November 1996. It is reprinted with permission.] ▢

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