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Political Misrepresentation: Forgetting the Common Man

The Old Patent Office Building in Washington today sits as the home of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery and American Art Museum, but it is a building which has lived many lives. It has served as a hospital, patent office—as its name would suggest—and home to a wide variety of events. One such event would be the Inaugural Ball of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865. The elite event brought in thousands of people, all paying \$10 a ticket for entry (Robertson 53). It was a costly event that was hosted for those who could afford to attend, for \$10 was equivalent to the average monthly earnings for a farmer in North Carolina of the time (Lebergott 462). And yet, this was a party being held in celebration of a man elected by the people. Why could the people not attend? It is this concept of a separation between constituent and state that has existed for so long that is most troubling.

Of course, Lincoln's ball took place a very long ago, so one might suppose that the age of representatives not fully representing their constituencies' interests is a practice that has long been put to bed. Unfortunately, if one looks, as social scientist Linda L. Fowler has, this is not the case. Instead, Fowler says Congress has remained largely the same: homogenous in race, economic background, and gender (Fowler 433). Certainly there are exceptions, but they are rare and do not in fact change the overall issue of representatives not being representative of their constituents.

This is because the means of running for office is intended to perpetuate the status-quo; continue to elect a portion of the population that is not representative of the interests of the entire population no matter what the negative consequences are, of which there are many.

The easiest contrast to see, and an important one to understanding the root of this, lies in money. The cost to run for elected office is enormously high, with figures reporting that the presidential candidates spent over \$1 billion combined during the 2008 presidential election (Park 18). The congressional figures are comparable. And while these campaigns were not self-funded, in that they took on donations from interest groups and individuals, research by Robert Biersack and others have concluded that it is necessary for these candidates to raise money early in their campaigns in order to receive money from other investors (Biersack 536). Therefore candidates must be able to inject money into their own campaigns prior to fundraising, and then have the connections—i.e. friends—to insert money into their campaigns. Biersack concludes that it is candidates who are able to successfully do this who ultimately raise the most money, and more often than not, win the election (542). It's chilling to believe that one of the obstacles to attaining elected office in the United States is money. The so called "land of opportunity" bars large swaths of the population from receiving the opportunity to attain office. Not only is this disturbing, but it can also be seen as undemocratic and therefore a direct violation of the foundations upon which our country was founded.

While remedies have been attempted, they have largely been unsuccessful. Beginning in 1974, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) started a program of partial public funding of campaigns that would allow for public funds to be made available to candidates that met a threshold of popular votes (Nelson 10-11). At face value, the plan sought to make campaigns more open to a variety of candidates so as to diversify the presidential race. However this fell flat

when it became clear that the thresholds that had been set by the FEC were done so as to “weed out third-party candidates and marginal candidates unlikely to receive their party’s nomination” (Nelson 11). This was not a system designed to diversify the playing field, but merely to provide another source of income for those already running for office.

The program further discriminated however in that it set limits on how much candidates could spend in various states, without accounting for how important the state was to the election in terms of electoral college votes or time of the primary election (Nelson 12). Therefore an incentive arose for candidates to opt-out of accepting this partial funding, and thereby circumvent the state-by-state spending limits they would be required to adhere to if they had accepted the funding. It’s because of this that the FEC’s regulations to make it more easy for candidates to join the race—despite their financial position—have only exacerbated the problem. In the 2016 presidential election, two candidates accepted FEC partial public funding (“Record Index 2016”). Neither of those candidates would go on to win, with only one of them, Green Party candidate Jill Stein, having participated in the general election. With the median income of the United States being approximately \$54,000, it’s simply too expensive for the average person to run for office (Proctor 5).

But perhaps we should stop to ask ourselves why we need the representatives of our communities to reflect the communities they are representing. Representatives by definition seek to represent the interests of their constituents. For congressmen this involves pushing for legislation which works to the benefit of their constituents, presidents implementing policy which is beneficial to the nation, etc. Of course the means of ensuring that this policy is implemented and proposed in a way which is beneficial is most effectively done by members of the community. This is why representatives such as former civil rights activist Rep. John Lewis have been so

important; they bring a new view to policymaking, a view which can oft-be ignored inside the marble halls of the Capitol (Fowler 431). Rep. Lewis has acted as one of the longest serving Congressmen in the United States and pushed for policies which have both reflected his past as a civil rights activist, as well as those of his majority black district through strong support for affirmative action and gun control legislation (Carlson D3). Through all of this, Rep. Lewis has maintained support from his constituency and worked to ensure he accurately represents his district. Representatives who most closely represent their communities increase the confidence that their constituents have in them. It is when populations have the greatest amount of confidence in their representatives that true change can be made as they stand behind them. It is this confidence that constituents must have in their representatives that is so vital in maintaining an accurate system of representation.

But we must still stop to ask ourselves: is having representatives who are representative of their population attainable? We've looked at how campaign finance reforms have failed to widen the group of people capable of attaining office, but perhaps there are ways we have yet to see. That being said, many argue that this is simply not a possibility and point to the aspect which make up a politician. Dr. Linda L. Fowler is one such person that keeps a pessimistic view on the subject. She looks to one quality in particular: political ambition (Fowler 432). It is the ambition one has to run for office that sets them apart from the rest of the population, Fowler says, the amount of time and money required to run a successful campaign requires one to truly wish to attain office and do whatever is necessary to obtain it (Fowler 432-433). Fowler says it is because of this lack of ambition and the ability to commit time or money to campaigns that make it so increasingly difficult to run for office (Fowler 433). With this in mind now we must again ask ourselves, what can we do?

What is most easy to do, and what I too found myself falling victim to in the midst of my writing, is to feel an apathy towards the entire system, to feel there is in fact nothing one can do and therefore one should do: nothing. The system after all has existed since the very founding of the constitution which set out restrictions on who can and cannot run for office, effectively “limit[ing] the scope of democratic choice” (Tillman 97). Life has always been this way and so perhaps there is nothing we can truly do, perhaps the system is inevitable and therefore we should resign ourselves to this. Doing nothing, however, does *nothing* to put an end to the system which had initially brought about this apathy to begin with. It is in essence agreeing with the system; stating that governments are unrepresentative and that’s okay. Well, it’s not. Governments ought to follow their intention: to safeguard the wellbeing of their people. Therefore we must find means of resisting the status-quo, of putting an end to the system and rejuvenating the American desire to participate in the electoral process. We must resist apathy no matter how difficult this may be. This is the process which often excites so many who do not normally consider themselves politically active. Sociologist Herbert L. Gans explains, it is when the interests of those who do not typically involve themselves are threatened that they jump to remedy the situation, lobbying representatives to get something done (Gans 280-281). And yet these people also represent a problem: they only seek temporary involvement that looks to further their interests in the short-term—or until their issue has been resolved (Gans 281). This is why we must make it clear that politics are not merely a temporary item which comes every four years, but an everyday facet of life and that individual involvement in it has true implications to them and their neighbors. It is easy to say, however to do so is incredibly difficult.

A method gaining traction is to encourage more people to run for office. This is a difficult process of course, as Fowler has said, those that lack the time or money to run for office will

likely not do so, and even worse is attempting to foster political ambition, a near impossible feat (Fowler 433). Furthermore, to create policy which promotes running for office is near impossible thanks to the desire those who already hold seats in Congress and other bodies to maintain their seats; to upset the status-quo is to make it more difficult for them to maintain their present position, making it unlikely they will act (Tillman 119). Therefore we must find an approach which does not fall victim to those who wish to see its failure; an approach which will stand tall and lead to a greater degree of representation for those who are so often left unrepresented.

One such case which has been proposed—and employed—by Cincinnati City Council member Alexander Paul George “P.G.” Sittenfeld, has been to run for office beginning at the local level (Sittenfeld). His proposed method allows those who might not have the funding to launch a state campaign, to begin by running for school board or city council. Sittenfeld, who first successfully ran for city council and then launched a senatorial campaign from there, has encouraged many to follow in his footsteps (Sittenfeld). This method of beginning at a local level may be the key to diversifying our political offices as candidates can potentially avoid sacrificing near as much time or money, and in the process foster any budding political ambition they may have. Furthermore, the mere publicity generated from their campaigns can encourage others to follow in their footsteps and perpetuate this process of diversification.

But of course this process of diversification cannot take place if the apathy we previously discussed continues to affect those not running for office. Therefore citizens need to ensure they get out and vote. With candidates emerging from their communities, this may come naturally to those who already trust their candidates, but to those who do not, it is necessary that they become informed, and at that, inform their neighbors and friends on the candidates and issues at hand. It is by doing this that communities can begin to form an open dialogue between each other in the

hopes that this interest in politics and issues facing communities becomes contagious and something that seems trivial—despite the fact their participation is anything but.

The process of forming more representative institutions will not be easy, but they are necessary to ensuring that the concerns of peoples are thoroughly explored in our nation. We cannot falter; we must ensure all are truly represented so that our institutions can faithfully declare the first line of the Constitution, “*We the people* of the United States.” We must return faith in the description of the United States as a democracy, a government of the people. The path to doing so is windy and not fully clear, but it is a journey we must embark on in order to return to the very shining ideals which make our nation great: a mutual acceptance and understanding of each other’s predicaments and a dedication to working to eliminate them. We must take up the task of ensuring no one is left without a voice by putting an end to the system of misrepresentation which has for so long plagued our country.

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