Democracy and Elections

In a previous essay, in trying to define democracy, one of the key components was "free and fair" elections. The conditions that make an election free and fair are varied, and as the aforementioned essay explained, voting laws have been changing since our nation's founding, and they continue to evolve.

Before we consider the matter of free and fair, we should remember that it is *we* who are the democracy, and that includes the election process itself. Our country does not import people from other countries to oversee the voting process, at least not yet. Some of you may recall how the United States has done just that for other countries whose new and fragile democratic systems required some guidance. This has been done at their request, simply to publicly show that a disinterested party is involved, to observe that the election process is not subverted. It is hard to imagine the citizens of our own country doing that; for a stable democracy that is over two hundred years old, it sounds like an especially humiliating prospect.

To offset even the appearance of impropriety, voting districts of our two-party system employ or recruit volunteers from each faction. In that way, any suspicions of voting irregularities are quashed by the fact that at least two parties are participating in the election process and keeping a watchful eye on each other. (Many jurisdictions elect or appoint Registrars of Voters from both parties for the same reason). Certainly when there are help shortages, parties can engage volunteers from outside of the district to oversee or help run the election. And in addition to poll workers, political parties are allowed a certain number of "observers" who bear witness to the process.

Over the years there have been certain restrictions when polls are open. Politicking inside the polling place is prohibited. Polls will sometimes require a certain distance from the building for campaigning candidates, as well as political signage. But these are much less of a concern than is the process by which eligible voters are first vetted, and then their votes cast and counted. There are many election laws that have to be observed, and Election Day moderators and workers require training and guidance to ensure that the election process runs smoothly.

In the past few years, the election process has been changed through the expansion of voting times to facilitate access to polls, and the use of electronic voting tabulation has streamlined vote counts; but both have stirred controversy. In the last presidential election, serious voting irregularities were charged by the incumbent or his surrogates, charges that have been debunked through investigations.

But, as has been mentioned before, democracy is a fragile system, and it relies heavily on the trust and faith in that system. When reckless claims are made against the system, it damages that trust, and recovery is slow. In the 2020 election, in Georgia, in a nationally reported allegation, two poll workers were accused publicly of manipulating votes. The accusations were eventually withdrawn. I mentioned my concern about this episode to a fellow resident who poo-pooed it as political spectacle that was inconsequential. Recently, I learned that across the country, and particularly in battleground states such as Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Georgia, as many as nearly forty per-cent of poll workers have decided not to participate. That is not inconsequential.

Will replacements be found for these poll workers? Perhaps. But a good deal of institutional knowledge will leave with those experienced workers. And new workers will have to be trained, and may lack the confidence to handle confrontations. Such circumstances only contribute to the instability of a function of democracy that needs to be strengthened, and bolstered by confidence and experience. And it gives one pause to consider if this sort of erosion of confidence has had an impact on the general populace's reluctance to participate in their democracy.

Those who want to participate in democracy in a meaningful way may want to think about becoming a poll worker. See your Registrar of Voters, stop in at the Town Clerk's office or contact your political party's Town Committee for more information.

Richard Waterman