

Engage Children in Election Education

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Imagine the presidential election that happened closest to your 10th birthday. Recall the rhetoric and the cadence of the campaign. Relive the successes and failures of his time in office. For me that election was the 1972 campaign between Senator George McGovern and President Richard Nixon. I was in the 4th grade at Racine's Jerstad-Agerholm Elementary School, and I still remember the school yard debates we had throughout the campaign.

According to political scientists, the campaign closest to your 10th birthday is the template by which you have judged all subsequent campaigns and presidents. We learn about politics through political campaigns, and those lessons last a lifetime. Elections are, to the young, tremendously precious windows of opportunity for learning about democracy.

Democracy is too important to leave to Democrats and Republicans who bloody each other in coarse campaigns marked more by vitriol than by virtue. You knew this when you were in the 4th grade, but it is worth remembering: there is a pervasive tension between the needs of a democracy and the needs of a campaign.

For democracies to flourish, they need to involve enough citizens to maintain the legitimacy of the political system. Problems are seen most clearly among our children. A majority of our children live in homes in which no parent votes. Voting is a habit formed young, but so is non-voting. In the November 2002 elections, just 9 percent of first-time eligible voters (ages 18 and 19) turned out to vote. Unless a sizable proportion of the 91 percent who did not vote in 2002 become active 2004, the legitimacy of our democratic systems will suffer in the long-term.

Campaigns focus on turning out just barely enough votes to win – not enough voters to maintain the legitimacy of the polis. Campaigns sometimes strategically suppress votes, and

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they careful to get the most “bang for the buck” when spending precious campaign money. Their goal is to reach proven voters by culling voting lists based on past voting performance. A democracy, though, needs to *create* proven voters. And that costs money. According to research by Yale’s David Nickerson, for every \$1 spent to mobilize a voter above the age of 64, it costs \$3 to reach and mobilize a voter 24 years old and younger.

Campaigns need to persuade voters, which is usually done by contrasting the candidates and by focusing on no more than three issues. A democracy, though, needs to educate voters. Campaigns are precious windows of opportunity during which citizens actually pay attention to politics. Citizens crave – and can appreciate – fairly complex public policies, but that is not what campaigns deliver.

Campaigns need to raise a lot of money, and with money on hand, they can reach more proven voters with sometimes simplistic and often divisive messages. Big Dollar contributors are especially welcomed and specifically courted. A democracy, though, needs citizens to make an emotional investment in campaigns. Even small Dollar contributions, \$5 or \$10, can generate tremendous rooting interests, and these small investments lead voters to follow campaigns much more closely than they otherwise would.

Campaigns are organized to win the next election, so they adopt different messages and strategies in the primaries and in the general elections. Turnout in primaries is especially low these days. Just 16.8% of eligible voters participated in the 2002 congressional primaries, and those voters tended to be far more liberal than the average Democrat and far more conservative than the average Republican. The result? Polarized choices were presented to the few folks who bothered to vote in the general election. A democracy, though, needs elections to yield candidates who can plan for the long-term. A democracy needs leaders who can build coalitions across generations and across party lines.

Who will knit together the needs of campaigns and the needs of a democracy? Not campaign consultants. Their jobs are to win elections, not to educate the citizenry. Perhaps candidates could be more conscientious about reaching out to disengaged voters, but in the hectic hurry of a campaign, that does not happen very often.

It is our job, as citizens who know enough to care, to build a democracy that can withstand the withering divisiveness of political campaigns. Children learn about politics from the news media, from schools, from religious centers, and most of all from their parents. Each of

these has failed in most respects, and it is time for us to campaign on behalf of improving democracy.

Schools need, once again, to teach civics. Participation in local political organizations should count toward high school “community service” requirements. Local television channels and radio stations should provide free time for public debate. Parents should talk, again, about politics at the dinner table. And the news media should praise noble leaders when praise is deserved. The next generation needs to be engaged – now.