



2006 Essay Competition (Over 18s category)

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“Does democracy need elections?”

The idea of a government of the people, by the people and for the people is at the risk of perishing from this earth; people have become disillusioned with the election of government officials, many see their votes as useless and unable to change the political currents. The re-election of Tony Blair to a third-term as Prime Minister in spite of massive disapproval ratings is a crushing blow to the belief in elections as an expression of the public will. Despondent, politically active individuals have focused their efforts to mold public policy away from the ballot box and toward halls of government. No longer is the main strategy to convince the voting public to elect candidates, rather, it is to influence elected officials to sponsor their policies; for instance lobbying expenditures in the United States have increased by 51% since 1998. Lobbying Spending Database available at <http://www.opensecrets.org/lobbyists/index.asp> (accessed on June 27,2006). There is no question democratic societies like Great Britain and the United States are moving away from electoral politics toward post-electoral politics, only why and whether this is an acceptable development.

Considering the latter question first, the progression toward post-electoral politics is an unacceptable development for any nation that considers itself a representative democracy. Democracy, by its nature, is a form of government based on the premise that each citizen is politically equal; no person or class of people have a right to govern, every citizen has the same freedom, rights and liberties. In representative democracies, giving each citizen an equal voice in the selection of government officials is believed to foster this equality. Focusing on post-electoral politics de-emphasizes the equality of all citizens, it creates an impression of that some are entitled to govern while everyone else is relegated to supplication. Post-electoral politics is an unequal affair, to effectively lobby or petition an individual or group needs a great deal of human and monetary capital. A person needs to keep abreast of all the issues currently before government and then the person must commence a campaign to influence officials to adopt their ideas. Unfortunately, most people lack the means to influence policy makers; instead, only the wealthy and the politically active are able to dedicate sufficient resources to sway policy makers, leaving those in government with a

skewed view of desired public policy. On the other hand, voting is a very cheap method for citizens to express their views on public policy; a citizen need only visit the appropriate polling place and, after a barrage of campaign advertisements, vote for the candidate they find most acceptable. Nonetheless, the current state of electoral politics also skews the perceived public policy preferences because external controls and influences limit the choices presented to voters.

Several factors hamper electoral politics, such as ballot access laws, campaign financing disparities, and asymmetric information on candidates. These phenomena warp the probabilities of success for candidates based on party affiliation, campaign support and media access; in many ways, this creates inequality comparable to that of post-electoral politics. Ballot access laws can be used to limit effective competition in elections to only those parties currently in government, establishing a class entitled to govern based on group affiliation. Campaign finance disparities enable wealthy candidates and those with wealthy supporters to generate name recognition thereby increasing their attractiveness to voters at the expense of other candidates with similar policies, which establish a class entitled to govern based on wealth. The asymmetry of candidate information is the fact that some candidates will warp information on their character and platform while others will be unable to inform voters altogether, it also creates a class entitled to govern. It gives candidates who lack principles or ethics and candidates who are favored by the media an advantage over their more honest and less favored opponents. Therefore, it seems most likely the winners of electoral politics under the current system are insincere, selfish candidates who are in league with the powerful, and the wealthy.

These results discourage many citizens from voting; they come to believe no matter how they cast their vote the results will be the same. In other words, people are indifferent to their options, either they do not feel a necessity to vote because any candidate is acceptable or every candidate is unacceptable and they would rather not choose which poison will be the lethal dose. Citizens realize instead of expending their limited resources on vain attempts to elect desired candidates, they should wait until a winner is determined and then begin to lobby that official to implement their desired policies. Yet, the effects of these external manipulations are not the cause for unresponsive of elections, they are merely symptoms of a larger problem; voting for representatives does not effectively respect citizen equality. A better and truer method of democratic elections would be the selection of officials by lottery; lotteries would properly respect each citizen's political equality and break the monotony of current election results, encouraging increased electoral politics participation.

Moving away from vote based elections may seem antithetical to representative democracy, but the history of voting shows it lacks a foundation in the principles of democracy. Voting to choose officials does not have its origins in democracy, but in oligarchy; in classical Greece, only oligarchies would

choose their officials by election. Such elections did not merely indicate the popularity of a candidate, but that he had power over his peers because a majority of wealth and influence in society choose him to rule. In contrast, classical democracies chose their elected officials by drawing lots; to them, election by lottery respected their deep belief in the political equality of all citizens by giving each candidate an equal chance of success. The fact that one candidate had more support or financial backing was irrelevant, popularity and wealth did not determine citizenship but only the universal characteristic of liberty. In like manner, representative democracies fail to encourage election participation because they do not respect the universal characteristic of liberty in every citizen; determining leaders through popular elections denigrates the equality of all citizens and transforms society into an oligarchy, giving only nominal respect to citizen equality.

This result should not be surprising, because the adoption of popular elections by modern societies was never intended to respect equality. Instead, their intended purpose was to use the collective wisdom of the citizenry to choose the best people for office so that government would implement the best policies for society. Put more bluntly, elections were adopted on the premise not every citizen is equal, that there are citizens gifted to rule and others to be ruled. This is even true of countries that use Proportional Representation, the diverse interest in society are given a voice in government not because each group is equal but the belief that inclusive representation will establish the best policies. In contrast, lotteries do not allow value judgments about who is gifted to rule, every citizen that seeks office has an equal opportunity of election; this would encourage every citizen who wishes to address a problem in society to seek office. However, if lottery elections are taken to their extreme, there is little participation by the public in the election process, which would seem to defeat the replacement of voting with lotteries and encourage more post-electoral politics.

The way to remedy this problem is to retain some form of ballot access laws, however, unlike current ballot access provisions they must be universally applicable to all candidates. In addition, entry fees should be discarded because fees do not show public support and gives one class of people, the wealthy and their agents, an unfair advantage, which may preclude more popular candidates from participation. Instead, a certain number of petition signatures should determine eligibility; though gathering signatures can be expensive, it is a means of public participation and shows public support for a candidate. If the signature threshold were high enough, it would revive interest in electoral politics because the more citizens that help their desired candidate gather signatures to qualify for the lottery, the costs incurred by that candidate will decrease, which may enable more candidates to participate in elections. This would make electoral politics less expensive than post-electoral politics and preserve the importance of elections in representative democracy.

Currently, it is unclear when the flaws of the current system will deal representative democracy its deathblow and unashamed oligarchy will replace it, exploiting post-electoral politics as “democratic” politics. However, one thing is clear the current political developments are undesirable for any society founded on principles of liberty and equality; for representative democracy to survive, it is fundamental that elections take place. But these elections cannot be exercises in frustration, democracy needs to abandon the oligarchic mechanism of voting and look to its classical heritage. Representative democracy needs to adopt lottery elections with uniform ballot access laws, it will reinvigorate society’s democratic institutions and resurrect the primacy of liberty and equality in society.