

Splintering Democracy

1. The Individual and Society

The existence of the individual is a perpetual process of creating and sustaining a unique system of value, from which meaning is born. The individual is the "being by whom values exist" (Being and Nothingness p.797), the sole source and progenitor of value, a factory of meaning.

The system of value is a meshing ground where all the individual's values meet, interact, overlap, and arrange themselves. Through his or her projects, in the act of doing a project, value is created. The system is the repository of these values. Value exists in the system not as a patchwork quilt of clearly defined shapes and patterns, but as a messy, fuzzy, conglomerate of elements that are constantly appearing, disappearing and mutating. From the interaction of this multitude of value elements, meaning arises. The individual's existence is defined as the process of creating and sustaining a system of value which is characterized by the emergence of meaning.

The society exists as the individual exists. Society's existence is the process whereby a group of individuals create or sustain a system of value which is characterized by the emergent meaning of that society, to the members of that society. The value system of a society is created and sustained through the individual members' active participation in the society. Defining a society as a group of individuals allows the term to be applied to the multitude of human collectives individuals are, to a greater or lesser degree, members of. This covers the couple, the family, the neighborhood, the workplace, the internet chatroom, the region, state, country... all collectives whose system of value the individual actively participates in creating or sustaining. This does not necessarily include all the collectives the individual has learned he or she belongs to. If the individual does not have an active role in creating or sustaining the collective system of value, then it is effectively meaningless to him or her; the individual does not exist in this society, and the society does not exist for him or her. Existence of the individual in a society is therefore defined by active participation in the creation or sustenance of that society's existence. Once an individual ceases to participate in the creation or sustenance of a society's existence,

once a society becomes meaningless to him or her, the individual no longer exists in the society and therefore cannot reap the benefits or be bound by the constraints of membership.

"If consumption has become the means by which people give existential meaning to their lives, it follows that low income households do not exist! Unable to participate in the existentialism of the marketplace, they have become invisible to retailers, advertisers and, indeed, the rest of society." (Splintering Urbanism, p.289)

Low income households are not members of the consumption society of middle and upper income households. They do not participate in the sustenance of this society's existence, and it is meaningless to them. They do not exist in it and it does not exist for them. The majority of societies have membership requirements, they do not offer 'open membership' to anyone who might wish to join. There is a vast range of membership requirements, for this particular example the membership requirement is a certain level and area of consumption. I will draw a distinction here however between membership in a society, and membership in an organization, the latter being defined as a collective in which the individual members do not actively participate in the sustenance of its value system. For example a charity one sends money to once a year but does not influence or participate in any other way. In other words, a society is the emergence of meaning from the conglomerate interactions of its members. A donation alone does not qualify as interaction, but this does not preclude donations from supplementing interaction.

2. Splintered Democracy: The United States

Who are the members of the society of the United States? Whose active participation sustains its existence? Whose actions directly influence its system of values? And, to whom is this society meaningful?

The majority of individuals with the title 'Citizen of the United States' do not exist within the United States as a society. There are only two avenues of citizen participation integrated into the design of the constitution of the United States. The first is the right to run for office, feasible for

the average citizen at the local level but virtually impossible for all but the wealthiest elite at a state or national level. The second, and most glorified, is the right to vote for representation. In the rest of this paper we will explore how the voting system currently in use, the structure of campaign finance, indirect participation through representation, and extremely low voter turnout, combine to effectively block the possibility of participation for all but the wealthiest elite, and create a giant splinter in the democratic system of the United States between those who sustain its existence as a society and exist within it as members, and those who do not.

Perhaps no type of society is as illusory as the Capitalist Democratic Nation. Its vitality is characterized by an external distributed deception of participation and membership that is transmitted culturally and educationally from generation to generation. And of the components that propagate this illusion, no structure is more subtly deceptive than the great beast of democracy: the vote.

3. Voting System

"Voting systems are to a democracy what the "operating system" is to a computer - voting systems are the software that makes everything else possible. Like a computer's operating system, a voting system functions silently and largely invisibly in the background, and yet it has an enormous impact on the five defining dimensions of a democratic republic: representation, participation, political discourse and campaigns, legislative policy, and national unity."

(http://www.fairvote.org/pr/problem_wta.htm)

The procedure the United States uses to evaluate elections, the plurality method, is fundamentally flawed in its application. The plurality method is a direct extension of the concept of majority rule, the idea that in an election the candidate with more than half of the votes wins. The plurality method extends this concept to cover elections with multiple candidates, situations in which no candidate is likely to get more than half of the total vote. The plurality method simply states that the candidate who receives the most first place votes wins the election. Despite its apparent simplicity and logic, this method is generally considered to be the worst possible system for deciding an election with more than two candidates. First and foremost it does not take voter preferences other than first choice into account at all. Rather than asking the voter to rank their preferences, as in most other voting methods, or to state their approval or

disapproval, as in the approval method, it forces the voter to pick the 'best choice'. This technique violates the Condorcet criterion, one of the most basic principles of fairness in voting theory. The Condorcet criterion was suggested by the Marquis de Condorcet in 1785 and states that "If there is a candidate or alternative that wins in a one to one comparison between it and any other alternative, then that candidate or alternative should be the winner of the election." (Modern Mathematics, p.6) In other words, if there is a candidate that would get the majority of votes if compared on a one-to-one basis with every the other candidate, this candidate should win the election. Of course, the simplistic ballot used in the United States does not even allow such comparisons to be made, as stated before, because it forces 'best choice' voting rather than preference ranking. the implication of this violation of the Condorcet criterion is that a candidate can be the last choice of a majority of voters and still win the election if the first choice vote is split between other candidates; the infamous 'third party spoiler' situation we are all too familiar with. The end result of this situation is what is known as 'Strategic voting'. Voters fill out their ballot in an attempt to manipulate the larger vote rather than choosing the candidate they truly would like to win. The clearest example of this is in US presidential elections, where voters feel like they must choose between 'the lesser of two evils' because voting for a third party candidate would be essentially wasting their vote.

The plurality method is so blatantly unfair and inadequate it seems unbelievable a nation as large and diverse as the United States could continue to use it into the twenty first century. Alternatives and variations abound, in fact the United States is one of only three well established democratic nations not to use a full representation system to elect at least one of their national legislatures. (The other two are Canada and Mongolia). "Full representation is the principle that any group of like-minded voters should win legislative seats in proportion to its share of the popular vote. Whereas the winner-take-all principle awards 100% of the representation to a 50.1% majority, full representation allows voters in a minority to win their fair share of representation alongside those in the majority." (<http://www.fairvote.org/pr/whatis.htm>) Although this principle does not make up for the flaws of the plurality method, it certainly allows a legislative body to be elected that is a more accurate reflection of the diverse views of a population than the winner-takes-all principle. Used in combination with a different voting method, such as the approval method adopted by six scientific societies, including the Mathematical Association of America and the American Mathematical Society, a *more fair*

voting system could be created. No voting system can be completely fair all the time. This was demonstrated by Kenneth Arrow in 1952 with Arrow's impossibility theorem: "When choosing among three or more alternatives, satisfying all of the fairness criteria is a mathematical impossibility." (Modern Mathematics, p.26)

But if voting is to be used as participation in society, great care must be taken to make the system as fair as possible.

There is currently legislation proposed to allow congress to consider new voting methods. Congress 2006 Commission Act HR (415) is a bill sponsored by Representative Alcee Hastings (D – FL) that proposes the creation of a committee "to analyze both the size of Congress and the method representatives are elected." (<http://www.fairvote.org/action/index.html>)

Several states are also reconsidering their voting methods in light of the 'Florida situation' of the 2000 election, but as of this writing, any significant reform is still a long way off.

4. Campaign Finance

Who can run for office? How do we know about the candidates that are running for office so as to make informed decisions on election day? And whose interests will these representatives represent once they are elected? The answer to all these questions is found in the structure of campaign finance.

"When all is said and one, the 1996 presidential primaries and election cost close to a *billion* dollars, far more than previous elections. In 1996, the average senate seat cost the victor close to \$5 million, and the average house winner spent \$700,000. this meant that each senator has to raise more than \$2000 a day and each house member \$1000 just to keep competitive in the next election. Where do candidates have to go for that cash?" (Debating Democracy, p.227)

The inordinate expense required to enter the state and national campaign game ensures that only wealthy citizens backed by other wealthy citizens and large corporations can enter. The freedom exists in theory for any citizen meeting constitutional requirements, but in practice a candidate without adequate funding simply cannot compete for the attention of the public in the modern world of campaigns.

The Cost: how is campaign money spent?

A campaign for office is a long arduous process of media hype, and media hype costs. Political consultants are needed to offer expertise in 'packaging' the overall picture of the candidate. They organize all the other campaign expenses to create a cohesive image for voters to recognize. President Clinton spent more than \$2 million in 1996 on one political consultant alone, and congressional campaigns regularly spend more than \$100,000. In the 2000 election cycle the total expenditure of both parties in the House and Senate on political consultants was \$21,857,803.

Polling is the next expense and the most important in deciding how a candidate will market himself in the election. Polls allow campaigns to push a candidates image in a more popular direction, and to measure the effectiveness of their techniques at work. As constant tracking of public opinion, polling allows a candidate to compare his progress against his competitors'.

The most expensive and most vital component of modern campaigns is media advertising. Through television advertisements in particular candidates build name recognition, develop character attributes, slander their opponents, and focus the themes of their campaign into concrete selling points. To advertise on television, the most visible campaign market, can cost upwards of \$100,000 a minute.

"Independent groups spent, conservatively estimated, more than \$98 million on media buys for political television commercials in 2000." (Buying Time 2000)

" only 18% of gubernatorial, senatorial and congressional debates held in 2000 were televised by network TV and an additional 18% were covered by PBS or small independent TV stations. More than 63% were not televised at all. " (Statements from Senators McCain, Feingold and Durbin on S. 3124, the Political Campaign Broadcast Activity Improvement Act)

The candidate's presence on television is increasingly an expensive idealized fabrication of political consultants, and decreasingly a glimpse into the candidates actual ideas, opinions and capabilities in debate on free airwaves.

In addition to these costs, direct mailing and press and media coverage have their own costs and require their own consultants. The larger the scope of the campaign, the more experts

are needed to manage marketing and fundraising, and the cost spirals upward. If a candidate does not have enough money to run a modern campaign, they become essentially invisible to the general populace who is accustomed to being presented with their campaign information as passive recipients of clever marketing.

In addition to exclusion on the basis of money, huge campaign expenses mean that an incumbent representative cannot wait until re-election approaches to begin fundraising, rather he must run a 'permanent campaign'. This requires a full time staff and means the interests of those who contributed significant amounts of money must be attended to and represented first and foremost in policy decisions.

the sources: where does campaign money come from?

US campaigns are, almost ubiquitously, privately funded. Given the enormous amount of money required to run a modern campaign, it is logical to wonder, where does all this money come from?

Contributions flow in from individuals, political parties, independent organizations, and political action committees (PAC). The stockpile they flow into determines how large they can be. In the modern campaign there are two kinds of cash, hard money and soft money. Hard money goes directly to the candidates campaign organization and is monitored by the Federal elections Campaign Act (FECA) of 1971. FECA imposes limits on the size of individual and PAC contributions. It requires the sources of donations to be disclosed, and it provides minimal public finance provisions for presidential campaigns. FECA does not regulate the absolute size of total campaign expenditures, or limit an individual's contribution to their own campaign, and most importantly it does not limit 'independent expenditures', donations which are not specifically granted to the candidates official campaign organization. This paved the way for soft money, which is completely unregulated and flows from anyone who wishes to give it to national political parties, to state parties through "independent" expenditures, to the candidate through "party building activities". Soft money effectively bypasses the entire FECA system, allowing campaigns to take as much money as they can from anyone they can get it from, with no demands on disclosure. (Democratic Debate, p.204 - 214)

These components combine to exclude potential candidates without enough money to run, to virtually exclude those without enough money to become visible, and to define representatives interests and behavior while in office. In a system that defines only two avenues of participation, one being the freedom to run for office, the other being the freedom to vote for representation, the current campaign finance system effectively blocks the general public from participating *at all*. Unless you are a member of the economic elite you cannot run for office, you cannot greatly aid the visibility of a third party candidate, and you will not have your interests represented in policy decisions. The last of these statements is perhaps the most important and demands expansion.

5. Indirect Democracy

The democratic system of the United States is one of indirect participation through representation. In terms of our earlier definitions, membership in the society of the US relies on the premise that an individual's thoughts and opinions are being accurately reflected by a system of representatives who then make the actual decisions impacting the society's system of values. Once an individual fails to be represented by their elected officials, that individual fails to be allowed active participation in their society and thereby fails to exist in that society at all. It is dubious whether participation through an indirect system such as this qualifies as membership at all. Once the individual loses their unique voice and is subsumed into the folds of mass opinion, they are already beginning to exist *less* than others. And once inequality of existence enters the equation we are a short step from a small society of elites, surrounded by a sea of non-existents.

In the United States non-existence is the norm. National and state representatives are removed from those they are supposed to represent and bound to the private interests that have bought them their job. With the exception of perhaps the Vermont town meeting the very idea of active participation and accurate representation is dead. In fact, it is generally assumed that representatives will not reflect the ideas of the average citizen, and is surprising when they appear to do so. This is not to say that the 'general public' is a cohesive body, united in opinion against moneyed interests. To the contrary, it is specifically because opinions in the US are so diverse that the current representational system is, even in theory, fatally flawed.

6. Low Voter Turnout

There is an enormous debate over why voter turnout is so low. Is it because Americans really just don't know about issues and don't care about how their government is run? Is it because people would rather leave the decisions up to those who are more knowledgeable? Or is it because citizens are disillusioned by the contemporary political spectacle they see how truly spurious their vote is? These are rhetorical questions, and I don't think it is possible or even necessary to come to a conclusion about the situation of non-voting in the US. Doubtless, there is a multitude of diverse and subtly varied reasons for not voting. It is not individual citizen's reasons for not voting that I am interested in, but the collective phenomenon of non-voting as a whole.

Some facts about non-voting:

- Voter turnout for presidential elections peaked in 1888 and has been generally declining since.

- Percentage of potential electorate that voted in recent general elections: 2002: 39.3%

2000: 50.1%

1998: 36.4%

1996: 49%

1994: 38.8%

(Democratic Debate)

- Those aged 18-20 have reduced their rate of participation by more than 40 percent since they were given the franchise in 1972 in both Presidential and mid-term elections. By contrast, those over 65 have actually increased their rate of participation – the only age group to do so. Those aged 65-74 increased by 1.4 percent in Presidential elections and by 8.3 percent in midterms, and those over the age of 75 by 20.9 percent in Presidential elections and by 25.2 percent in mid-terms.

- The voting rates of those with incomes under \$11,100 have declined by 32.6 percent in presidential elections since 1964 and by 47.8 percent since 1966 in mid-term elections. Those with incomes over \$55,000 have reduced their rate of participation by 16.9 percent in presidential elections and by 21.5 percent in mid-terms."

- The voting rates of those who have only completed from one to eight years of schooling have fallen 52.3 percent in Presidential elections since 1964 and by 48.7 percent in mid-terms since 1966. The voting rates of those with more than 4 years of college has declined by 9.9 percent in Presidential elections and by 8 percent in mid-terms."

-The lowest age group, those 18-20, voted at a 24.8 percent rate in 2000 and at an 8.9 percent rate in 1998. This compared with a voting rate of 66.3 percent in 2000 and 58.7 in 1998 for those 65-74 (the highest voting cohort). Those with incomes under \$11,100 voted at a 29.4 percent rate in 2000 and a 19 percent rate in 1998, compared to a 2000 voting rate of 65.6 and a 1998 voting rate of 49.2 for those with incomes over \$55,000. Those with only one to eight years of schooling voted at a 23.2 percent rate in the 2000 election and a 19.4 rate in the 1998 mid-term, compared to a 71.9 percent rate for those who had more than a college education in 2000 and 59 percent in 1998.

(Committee for the Study of the American Electorate analysis of Census 2000 election survey)

- Compared with other democracies the United States voter turnout lags far behind. A few examples:

Australia: 1996 Legislative- 96.3

1998 Legislative- 95.16

Azerbaijan: 1993 Presidential- 97.6

Belgium :1995 Parliamentary- 91.15

1999 Parliamentary- 90.5

Canada: 1993 Prime Ministerial- 73

1997 General- 67

Cyprus: 1996 Legislative- 90.13

Finland: 1999 Parliamentary- 65.27

Germany: 1994 Parliamentary- 71

1996 Parliamentary- 67.5

Greece: 1993 General- 78.23

1996 Parliamentary- 76.34

Italy: 1995 Regional- 77.4

Portugal: 1995 Parliamentary- 67.2

1996 Presidential- 66.3

South Africa: 1999 National Assembly- 89.28

Sweden: 1994 Parliamentary- 87.3

Turkey: 1995 Parliamentary- 85.2

1999 Parliamentary- 87.09

Ukraine: 1998 Parliamentary- 86.6

(Federal Election Commission)

If you disagree with everything I have said so far, you cannot disagree with the fact of non-participation, the free choice of the majority of citizens of the United States in the majority of recent elections. If nothing else splinters the existents from the non-existents in this society, the conscious choice not to participate must. If nothing else undermines the authority the US government feigns to derive from the citizens of the United States, the fact that these citizens do not acknowledge it as integral to their existence does.

The society of the US has lost its importance and relevance to the majority. To me, this information is heartening rather than discouraging. I see a population that has been rendered non-existent by the current national society, and that is slowly withdrawing its belief in the pretense of that democracy. I see a citizenry, alienated by a specious government structure, but united by independent, uncoordinated, cooperative acts. I see the possibility for the emergence of a new society from the disillusioned, nonexistent remains of the old.

The old regime does not have to be dismantled, simply undermined.