

Reforms to the American Electoral System

When our ancestors drafted the Constitution, they did not envision the current political process or electoral system that we use today. Over the years, it has evolved to become more inclusive and open to the American people. However, there are still several areas where the political system could be improved. I will examine three areas which, if altered, could help reform the current political process and reduce the current flaws in the system.

Money in Political Campaigns

The recent Citizens United Supreme Court decision has substantially changed the way American elections are conducted, and I would argue for the worse. The decision allows corporations and unions to spend unlimited sums of money advocating for the election or defeat of a candidate.¹ The Court argued that money is speech, and that the right to spend unlimited amounts of money to advocate for or against a candidate is protected by the First Amendment. This unlimited spending has saturated the political arena, allowing a few corporate donors to fund candidates and shape the policies they support.

In 2012, we saw the effects of this unlimited spending. Dozens of so-called “super” political action committees (SuperPACs), which are allowed to spend unlimitedly without coordinating with candidates, were formed and began receiving huge donations from individuals and corporations. Mainly, this money was used by the SuperPACs to purchase advertisements in

¹ The New Yorker, “Money Unlimited,” May 21, 2012,
<http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/05/21/120521fa_fact_toobin>

key swing states.

The Presidential election alone came with a total price tag of over \$2 billion, a new record.² Almost \$100 million was donated by Sheldon and Miriam Adelson, Las Vegas casino owners who donated record amounts to Republican SuperPACs and candidates.³ These large contributions diminish the importance of the average donor, and persuade candidates to appeal to rich individuals who can contribute to their campaign.

The best solution to this issue is to reverse the Citizens United decision. This will have to be done with either a Constitutional amendment or another decision by the Supreme Court. Such an amendment has already been proposed by several members of Congress, notably Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont. President Barack Obama has also called for an amendment to overturn the decision, saying, “we need to seriously consider mobilizing a constitutional amendment process to overturn Citizens United.”⁴ Overturning the Citizens United ruling will limit the amount of money that corporations and unions can spend on an election. It would reestablish the importance of the individual donor, and therefore be more inclusive to more Americans, rather than just millionaires.

However, this may not be enough. Even restricting unlimited spending, special interest groups still control most of the money in American politics. Politicians are forced to appeal to these groups to receive funding for their campaigns. It may be in the interest of the American people to move to a public funding-type election system that would limit the influence of special

² CBS News, “\$2 billion price tag for presidential election,” Dec. 6, 2012, <[http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250_162-57557698/\\$2-billion-price-tag-for-presidential-election/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250_162-57557698/$2-billion-price-tag-for-presidential-election/)>

³ Press Herald, “Election’s biggest money pair gave \$95 million,” Dec. 7, 2012, <http://www.pressherald.com/politics/elections-biggest-money-pair-gave-_95-million_2012-12-07.html>

⁴ Senate.gov, “Sanders Welcomes Obama Support for Amendment to Undo Citizens United,” Aug. 30, 2012, <<http://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/news/?id=ec2fdab8-f726-42b6-8573-f20fe117157d>>

interest groups. But, this would be a radical change from today's system, and we must first work to reverse the impact of the Citizens United ruling.

Media Coverage of Campaigns and Elections

In today's 24/7 news cycle, the media is constantly looking for the most sensational news they can find. In order to create the narrative that they want, they use sound bites of candidates instead of full speeches, often highlighting the most entertaining "zinger" that a candidate delivers in a speech or debate performance. This limits the public's exposure to a candidate and their actual platform, and instead creates a celebrity-like following of the election. Because this is the case, the media also tends to create the perception that elections are extremely close, even if they may not be. This is to increase their viewership, which would drop in an uncompetitive election.

In addition to this, newspapers, which generally have more in-depth coverage of campaigns and candidates than TV networks, are seeing their readership decline at record rates. This is threatening the ability of the American people to make an informed decision. Instead, they will be basing their decision off of sound bites and partisan advertisements.

In 2012, we saw this issue play out right before our eyes. Mitt Romney was hit with a devastating sound bite in which he said that 47% of the country would vote for President Obama "no matter what," because they have no personal responsibility and they can't care for themselves. He was also devoured in the media and in social media for his statement that he was brought "binders for of women" when looking to fill a cabinet position. President Obama was hit with a sound bite when he exclaimed "you didn't build that," referring to public works projects

which aid small business.⁵

The press even covered the fact that Governor Romney was practicing “zingers” before his first debate with the president, as if that was even somewhat relevant to the election or the qualifications of the candidates.⁶ All of this proves the relevance of soundbites in the media, and their importance to candidates in the election. Ultimately, TV networks have to cover the news in a way that is appealing to the American people. If we assume that the system they’re using now is best tailored to receive a large audience, then we must assume that the American people would rather hear sound bites than substantial and relevant news.

We can take steps to improve the coverage of elections, by regulating networks to cover both candidates equally on air, and to force them to air more than just 5 seconds of any given speech. This would help balance the media and decrease the importance of sound bites in American politics. Maybe then candidates would focus on shaping important policies instead of practicing one-liners to entertain people.

However, the issue appears to be much deeper than this. It seems the American culture prefers an entertaining election over a competitive one, and the way the media covers elections today is a result of what the American people are interested in. Even if we change how the media covers elections, there is nothing to stop individuals from simply changing the channel or flipping to another page in the newspaper.

⁵ TIME Magazine, “Mitt Romney’s ‘47 Percent’ Gaffe Tops Yale’s Quotes of the Year,” Dec. 13, 2012, <<http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/12/13/mitt-romneys-47-percent-gaffe-tops-yales-quotes-of-the-year/>>

⁶ CSMonitor, “Mitt Romney’s debate ‘zingers’: Will he be able to deliver?,” Oct. 3, 2012, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/DC-Decoder/Decoder-Wire/2012/1003/Mitt-Romney-s-debate-zingers-Will-he-be-able-to-deliver>>

Quality of Competing Candidates

Due to the primary system that we currently have in place, some argue that the quality of candidates that run for president may be lower than it could be. The primary system forces candidates of both parties to become more partisan than they may be to appeal to the base of their party, and then they are forced to explain that position or move back to the center for the general election. In addition, candidates that are more qualified for the position often lose to a less qualified candidate who may seem more appealing based on personality or charisma.

We saw this in 2008, when a first-term Senator, Barack Obama, defeated Hillary Clinton, who was previously the First Lady of the United States and serving her second term as a U.S. Senator for New York. He was much less qualified than her—and other candidates like Senator Joe Biden—but was able to capture the moment with his charisma and personality. Additionally, candidates who may appeal most to the American people are often unable to get past the primaries; of all the Republican candidates running in 2012, Governor Jon Huntsman had the closest ideological match when compared to the average American voter, according to Gallup.⁷ Huntsman dropped out of the Republican primary after facing a humiliating defeat in New Hampshire, placing a distant third.

One way to improve this problem may be by holding a national primary, where the entire nation votes on the same day for the candidate who they want to represent their party in the general election. This would stop smaller states like Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina from having such a key role in deciding who the party's nomination is going to be. Candidates are forced to become more conservative or liberal to appeal to voters in these states, otherwise

⁷ Gallup, "Americans See Views of GOP Candidates Closer to Their Own," Dec. 29, 2011, <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/151814/americans-huntsman-romney-paul-closest-ideologically.aspx>>

they risk facing a similar outcome as Governor Huntsman had in 2012.

Another way to fix this problem would be by improving the media coverage of the candidates, which tend to focus on the personality and likability of candidates over their experience and qualifications. I've already discussed this previously, but it would help inform voters of the candidates rather than resorting to sound bites. Another way to improve the quality of candidates would be to create an environment where third party candidates are encouraged and not suppressed. This will allow for more candidates to be considered for the position, and create a forum where many qualified candidates can compete instead of two.

Ultimately, the American people will choose whichever candidate appeals to them most, and often times that is not the most qualified or experienced candidate. Qualifications and experience may not be the best indicator of what makes a good president; we must keep in mind that Abraham Lincoln only served one term in the U.S. House of Representatives before becoming the President of the United States.

Conclusion

The American political system is not perfect, and there are many ways that we could work to improve it. However, it seems the system is moving in the wrong direction. The media is becoming more partisan and sensationalized, and elections are being bought by millionaires and corporations. If these issues are not addressed in the coming years, we risk losing qualified candidates, and we will pick between two horses, funded and nearly handpicked by the wealthiest Americans.