

The American Elections, the Vote, and a Modest Proposal

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Every four years, the world is taken on a roller-coaster ride as Americans cast their vote for the President of the United States. Though votes are also cast to fill vacancies in the Congress, state Governorships, and other state and local offices, the story of the quest for the Presidency is an all-consuming affair. This year's race for the White House, whose occupant is generally known as the world's most powerful man, has everywhere generated more than the usual excitement, and understandably so: for the first time in American history, the Anglo-Saxon white male's iron-clad grip over this office, indeed his prerogative to claim the office as his birthright, seems to have been put into question. Had Hillary Clinton been the sole Democratic front-runner, she would already have, in our cliché-worn times, 'made history'; all but poised to claim victory as the nominee of the Democratic Party, she suddenly found more than a worthy contender in Barack Obama, who is not only young but, from his father's side, of African descent. In a country where nearly one out of every three African American males will, in his lifetime, have had some experience with the criminal justice system, the political ascendancy of Obama is a wholly unexpected political phenomenon.

Much to everyone's surprise, Obama won in Ohio; but if that was supposed to pave the way for his easy nomination as the Democratic Party's candidate for the Presidency, the voters in New Hampshire robbed him of his advantage. Clinton outwitted him and the scales are now evenly tilted. Though the Republican candidates are less colorful by comparison, certainly to interested spectators overseas, the race in the Grand Old Party was similarly wide open before John McCain suddenly appeared to all but seal his nomination. All of this is often described as a resounding testimony to the vitality of American democracy, and merely serves to confirm Americans in their cherished belief that it is for them to set the benchmark for what constitutes democracy.

Many travesties have, of course, been committed in the name of democracy, and it is a chilling thought that the same country which could not conduct fair elections in either 2000 or 2004, even requiring the Supreme Court to crown the President, partly justified its assault upon Iraq with the argument that the United States was determined to bring democracy to the volatile Middle East. Dynastic politics, it was long argued by American and European political scientists, seemed ingrained among Asians and Africans, lesser people not infused by the sentiment of democracy, though if Hillary Clinton gets elected to office the White House will have been occupied at the end of her first term by a Clinton or a Bush for twenty-four years.

American democracy, then, is much less a dynamic thing than what one might imagine, and it is certainly safe to aver that it is, for people in some parts of the globe, a positively dangerous thing. It is dangerous not because it will emancipate people who are in shackles, much less because American democracy has generated ideas feared by despots and authoritarian rulers, but rather for the all-too-obvious and therefore overlooked reason that an American election invariably has global repercussions. When the people

of Mauritius or New Zealand go to the polls, the consequences of their votes do not generally extend beyond the boundaries of their respective countries. Even the electoral exercise and outcome in India, for all the country's aspirations to be recognized as a great power, has comparatively little weight outside South Asia. An American election, however, is never merely an American affair – indeed, one suspects that it is more closely watched in some countries than it is in parts of the United States itself. In presidential elections, generally half of the electorate votes; in other election years, the voter turnout is poorer. One of the many luxuries of being an American is that one can, evidently, be supremely indifferent about the outcome of a presidential election. But luxuries, as is commonly known, are obtained at someone else's expense; many must labor to make available luxuries to the few.

This brings me, then, to my modest proposal. When America votes, the world watches and listens – and even, here and there, rumbles. Larger countries, such as China and India, or highly affluent and friendly nations such as Switzerland and Australia, can shield themselves to a substantial degree from the consequences of an American election. But smaller countries, as well as those which have earned the enmity or wrath of the United States, are not so fortunately placed. Though political scientists, policy makers, journalists, and other commentators have written profusely on the meaning of democracy, and there has been much speculation about how democracy might be stretched to make it something more than an exercise in casting votes, the idea of electoral democracy remains paramount. The United States, in particular, has demanded allegiance to the idea of 'one person, one vote'. The uniquely global phenomenon that the American election is, the world should insist that every adult around the globe should have the opportunity of voting in an American election and so be able to have a hand in shaping his or her own future. One must ensure, especially, that the citizens of those countries that have faced the brunt of American oppression, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Nicaragua, Cuba, Iraq, and Sudan, have the power of the vote to influence the course of events in the United States. To be sure, this might amount to nothing more than having the inalienable right of deciding whether they wished to be bombed into oblivion by a Democrat or a Republican, by a Reagan, Bush, or a Clinton.

If anyone deems this an immodest proposal, it remains only to end with a singular observation. In outsourcing their elections to people who must be ever so vigilant about the course of affairs in the United States, Americans may finally succeed in bringing the idea of American democracy to wondrous fruition. And the numerous theorists who have been writing the obituary of the nation-state should similarly feel quite fulfilled.