

Nygaard Notes

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Right-To-Vote Amendment, Part 2: Universal Suffrage

I was walking across the Mississippi River today—one of the enduring joys of my life—and I saw that someone had meticulously stamped a very large political message in the snow. “Taxation is Theft,” it said, in letters large enough to be easily read from the Washington Avenue bridge 70 feet above. This is an example of a libertarian idea that has been promoted for decades as the basis for innumerable tax cut proposals. Whoever created this message was promoting not a specific policy or proposal, but an *idea*, or perhaps a philosophy, favored by the sectors of society that we call “right wing” or sometimes “conservative.”

A contrasting idea would be that taxation is an expression of solidarity, or perhaps sharing, as it is essentially a pooling of resources for the purpose of serving the common good. The degree to which tax money is actually used for the common good depends on the degree to which the decision about how to use tax money is democratic and reflective of the wishes of a majority in all sectors of the society.

Any proposal to spend tax money (for any reason) will have a better chance of passing if more people agree that taxes are an expression of solidarity and sharing, and fewer people think that taxation is theft.

The Idea Behind Right-to-Vote

In the last Nygaard Notes I talked about the proposed Right-to-Vote Amendment to the Constitution, or RTVA, which would read like this: “Every citizen of the United States, who is of legal voting age, shall have the fundamental right to vote in any public election held in the jurisdiction in which the citizen resides.”

It was on December 10th of 1948—seventy years ago this week—that the General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 21 Section 3 of that document reads: “The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and

genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”

“Universal suffrage” just means that every adult citizen has the right to vote. (Limiting the franchise to adults, some would argue, is not “universal.” We’ll leave that aside for now.) “Equal suffrage” means that no one’s vote counts more than anyone else’s.

The idea of universal suffrage in the RTVA is indicated by the words “every citizen.”

The Importance of Ideas

Here’s an excerpt from the 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hill Collins: “One distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change. New knowledge is important for both dimensions of change.”

One of the implications of what Collins says is that, if we change institutions without changing the way that people think (that is, change consciousness), we simply set ourselves up for a backlash. However, if we change our thinking—that is, bring new ideas into broad acceptance—then the changes made to institutions will be judged in light of the new ideas and will be likely to survive and might even pave the way for future, more fundamental, change.

This is one reason why it is so crucially important to emphasize ideas when we are attempting to change policy. The second reason is that the ideas we call upon to build support for policy or institutional changes may also help to change consciousness in other important

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Greetings,

With this issue I end my series of Six Steps to Better Elections. That's down from the Original Seven Steps, but the number doesn't really matter. I'm sure you can think up your own list. The thing to keep in mind is that the simple idea of One Person, One Vote is a powerful one, one that people around the world have been, and are, willing to die for.

Back in 1967, Martin Luther King said that "We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin ... the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society." If we really wish to have a functioning democracy, we'll have to transform our political/economic system from a capitalist one—our current thing-oriented society—into something completely different. Capitalism, after all, is an anti-democratic system of One Dollar, One Vote, with the rules enforced by a ruthless marketplace. A person-oriented society would be a different animal entirely, with every person's vote valued and counted the same as everyone else's.

Am I dreaming? Maybe. But all six of the steps in this series would move us a little closer to being the person-oriented society that King called for. May that dream move us to work for universal and equal suffrage, on the way to a radical revolution of values in the United States.

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ways. And here it helps to think a few steps ahead, like a chess player. This very much applies to the campaign for universal suffrage embodied in the RTVA.

Now I ask you to consider the Nygaard Notes "Quote" of the Week from issue number 601 of September 20, 2016. It's from the book "Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective", by Pierre L. van den Berghe [forgive the sexist "submen" reference; women were included in the "othering" referenced here]:

"The egalitarian and [liberty-affirming] ideas of the Enlightenment spread by the American and French Revolutions conflicted, of course, with racism, but they also paradoxically contributed to its development. Faced with the blatant contradiction between the treatment of slaves and colonial peoples and the official rhetoric of freedom and equality, Europeans and white North Americans began to dichotomize humanity between men and submen (or the 'civilized' and the 'savages'). The scope of applicability of the egalitarian ideals was restricted to 'the people,' that is, the whites, and there resulted what I have called 'Herrenvolk democracies,'—regimes such as those of the United States or South Africa that are democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate groups. The desire to preserve both the profitable forms of discrimination and exploitation and the democratic ideology made it necessary to deny humanity to the oppressed groups."

The idea that people of color are subhuman, less-than, or somehow "other" lives on in the present-day United States. The President's naked invoking of racial fear, as

well as the less-flagrant dog-whistle signaling that has long been a part of political campaigns, serve to reinforce the racial caste system that plagues the U.S. to the present.

When I identify the amending of the Constitution to guarantee universal suffrage as Step 6 in my list of steps to take toward better elections, I am referring to the entire process of building support for *the idea* of universal suffrage. The idea that every human has the same claim to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship as everyone else *simply because we are human beings* is a powerful anti-racist basis around which to organize.

And this is a perfect example of the dynamic relationship between policy—who gets to vote—and philosophy—who *should* get to vote.

Advocating for universal suffrage is not the only way to reinforce the "We're all human" message in the public policy realm. The anti-racist message is reinforced whenever we work to create or maintain programs and policies that are universal. Single-payer health care is an anti-racist program. Universal public education the same. Certainly our shining example of social solidarity—Social Security—reinforces the idea that all people are people, countering the racist "sub-human" idea that some of us are human and some are less than that.

But really (you say), what's the point of advocating for a Right-to-Vote Amendment when we have a President and a Senate majority who will never go for it? The point is that presidents and members of Congress come and go, but the work of changing consciousness never ends. If we want our seeds to grow, we need to tend to the soil. ♦

Voting and Institutional Change

When we consider the recently introduced Right-to-Vote Amendment, it offers a little lesson on the importance of voting in the current U.S. context. I think you'll see what I mean if you consider the following six points.

Point 1: The desire to reduce the political power of people of color is a major motivation behind the many voter suppression initiatives stalking the land in recent years.

Point 2: A constitutional amendment which affirmatively guarantees the right of everyone to vote would be a major tool in the resistance to the ongoing threat of voter suppression.

Point 3: I mentioned in the last Nygaard Notes that Representative Mark Pocan (Democrat WI) introduced just such an amendment in the last Congress, co-sponsored by 37 Democrats. It was sent to the House Subcommittee on the Constitution and Civil Justice, where it died.

Point 4: Under the current Republican majority, the House Subcommittee on the Constitution and Civil Justice is chaired by Iowa Republican Steve King. King is rather famous for his support of white supremacy and for his anti-immigrant ravings. In case you think this is just my opinion, check out this article in the Des Moines Register, published on November 1st:
www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2018/11/01/steve-king-jewish-muslim-republican-racist-poll-congress-iowa-4th-election-controversial-offensive/1844672002/

Point 5: The recent election produced a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives.

Point 6: In the current Congress, the ranking minority member of the Committee is Democrat Steve Cohen of Tennessee. Starting next month, when the Democrats are in the majority, Cohen will likely be the new chair of the Committee. Cohen was one of the co-sponsors of the Right-To-Vote Amendment resolution.

The meaning of all of this: If Rep. Pocan introduces his bill again in the new Congress, and it gets referred to the same House Committee, it may actually go somewhere. (A spokesperson in Pocan's office told Nygaard Notes he is "still passionate" about the amendment.)

So, a big thank-you to all of you who worked to change the political composition of the House of Representatives. Whether one considers oneself a Democrat or not, the new majority in the House has all sorts of meaning, including the elevation of a whole different set of Committee chairs. And Committee chairs have a lot of power, as they set the agenda, including making decisions about which issues get a hearing and which issues die unheard.

What we see here is that one of the effects of the November 6th election was to move us a little closer to universal suffrage in the United States. And that's true even though it's likely that most voters gave not one second's thought to the idea of universal suffrage. The process of social change is complicated, is it not? ♦

Six Steps to Better Elections 2018

Over the past few weeks I've presented a number of specific steps that the United States *could* take to move us toward more democratic and fair elections. I'm sure that you can think of more measures that you could support, or are already supporting. My proposals have been intended to spark the imagination, to remind people that a democratic process is just that: a process. As this issue's "Quote" of the Week says, we always have to keep working and fighting on the election front.

What are we fighting for, and what are the obstacles? We are fighting for a more-democratic political system, an

inclusive system in which all voices are heard and in which the constant tension between individual rights and social rights is debated openly and resolved fairly.

Elections in the modern United States are corrupt, but the problem is not "voter fraud" or the overt "theft" of elections. Those things do happen, but they pale in comparison to the two real issues. One issue is the suppression of the votes of targeted groups. The other issue is the corrosive effects of big money.

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My list of Steps Toward Better Elections arbitrarily ends at six, but the list could easily be much longer. As you think about ideas and proposals that *you* might support, remember to evaluate any proposal not only in terms of “can it pass the Congress,” but also in terms of “will it move us away from “one dollar, one vote” to “one person, one vote.”

Voting is likely not the route to the fundamental change we need to see in transforming our white supremacist culture into an inclusive, liberatory one. But voting—and, more importantly, the *idea* of universal suffrage that we emphasize when working to protect the right to vote—can get us marching in the right direction. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: *“Broad Political Movements and Bloody Struggles”*

This week’s “Quote” appeared in The Atlantic magazine in 2012 in an opinion piece by Tyler Reny. Here are the opening words of his piece, which was entitled “How the U.S. Is Still Struggling With Universal Suffrage.” Apparently it was published earlier in the National Journal, but I couldn’t find that original piece. Anyhow, here it is:

In the United States, a country that takes great pride in its democratic institutions, voting is widely referred to as a fundamental, universal, even natural right for U.S. citizens—only superseded by the “unalienable” right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Yet the bevy of demobilizing and disenfranchising voter-identification laws passed by state legislatures in the last two years serve as an important reminder that the franchise isn't listed as a right in any of our founding documents and, as history shows, was never considered one. It is only through broad political movements and bloody struggles that the franchise has been expanded to underrepresented citizens.

For most of U.S. history, the government was not a government “of the people, by the people, for the people,” but a government of, by, and for the wealthy white male landowning elite.

Read the whole essay here:

www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/09/opinion-how-the-us-is-still-struggling-with-universal-suffrage/428883/

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