

Choking on Politics!

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Political accountability at its best is nothing to get excited about. That's why we use constitutions to limit the jurisdiction of the political process. It's also why assorted public officials around the country refer to legislatures as 'the sausage factory.' Like sausage, you do not want to see laws being made.

Given its enormous inherent weaknesses, the political process needs to work as well as possible, which means well-informed, broad-based public participation. ***We've made that impossible by voting on too many things.*** In Bexar County, each voter has a chance to vote for nearly forty representatives; everything from President to US Senator, County Clerk, Land Commissioner, School Board, Edwards Underground Water District, and Sheriff. Since many races are contested in a primary, and then a general election, that's over one hundred officeseekers to pick from. There are also judges (over 30) to pick and state and local ballot issues to decide. The impossibility of that task is why voter turnouts are low in the vast majority of races, microscopic in many, and that the reason for voting for someone is often trivial, based on scant information, or misinformation.

The media is also over-extended. Many races are invisible to the vast majority. There are so many things to vote on that only an unemployed political junkie could make an informed choice in each race. The implications are unacceptable and unsustainable. The few not totally alienated by the hopelessness of keeping up focus on the few political forums of special interest to them; law firms on judges races, teacher unions on school board races, etc. Too much politics puts special interests in control. It minimizes political accountability to the general public.

One way to reduce the number of elected officials is to expect less of an over-extended government. That would be my strong preference. Private initiative, markets, and charities will handle many issues better than the political process.

The only other ways to reduce the number of elected officeholders and the number elections (and thereby spur more broad-based, more informed participation in the political process) are greater trust of political parties, or by making outcomes more important to voters. That would mean concentrating power locally in fewer elected officeholders, and lengthening terms of office. Shifting power from federal to state, and state to regional and local governments, and concentrating power in fewer elected offices would strengthen the incentive to be informed and to vote, and it would increase competition among local jurisdictions. That means consolidating

some overlapping jurisdictions (cities and counties, various special districts), and converting some elected positions to appointed positions.

The concentration of power can bring serious abuses. I propose two safeguards: 1.) Streamlined recall procedures for all elected office-holders; and 2.) An accessible petition and referendum process for overturning decisions.

I can only comfortably offer the suggestions above as a starting point for debate and research. The substantial lack of either on this critical subject is very troubling. The details of any reform proposals are critical, and the implications of inaction are bleak. Microscopic voter turnouts, and rising voter alienation and cynicism about politicians and government, cannot comprise a true republic, much less be true to our founding fathers' vision of government (eloquently stated by Lincoln) of the people, by the people, and for the people. Fewer, more important campaigns is a critical leadership issue.