

Elections By Sound Bite: It's A Tragedy Voters are So Shallow

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I'm tired of campaigns for president, mayor, governor, representative, and senator and how our system operates. Here is why.

I'm tired of meaningless sound bites like, "I'm for education of our children, not for releasing murderers from prison." The implication is that the speaker's opponent is against education of our children, all the while looking for opportunities to release dangerous people from prison. Hollow, well-rehearsed phrases repeatedly present themselves like a bad child. Every candidate is "for the working man," but you can't be "for the working man," for the lower class, for the upper class, for the interest groups, and for the party powerful all at the same time.

When a reporter's question doesn't fit the politician's rehearsed answer, the politician gives the rehearsed answer anyway, pretending to actually answer the question. The public seems satisfied with such empty drivel, and alleged "hard-hitting" reporters miss opportunities to say, "Thanks, but could you answer the question that I asked?"

I'm tired of reductionist rhetoric. Politicians talk about complicated issues as if there were only one variable to consider. Clinton has repeatedly taken credit for the prosperous economy that we have enjoyed these past few years, and Reagan and Bush did the same thing in the 1980's and early 1990's. The national economy is too complicated to reduce to one program, one person, or one piece of legislation.

Violent crime rates, school standardized test scores, and so forth are affected by a variety of variables, not one person or one policy.

There is no better personification of this problem than Ross Perot. During the debates when he was running for president in 1992, he was asked how he would deal with partisan gridlock in Washington. "Simple," he said. "We'll just get them all together and work it out." If it were simple, there wouldn't be a problem.

Every issue has positive and negative effects, but politicians lead us to believe that their personal policies have only positive effects while their opponent's policies have only negative effects. How I would love to hear someone actually say, "This bill would have a negative effect on a percentage of the population, but that is to be expected with any legislation or policy."

I'm tired of politicians taking credit when good things happen while distancing themselves from the not-so-good. Recent data has shown that the violent crime rate has dropped more this year than ever before. Al Gore took credit, saying it was the result of the Clinton administration's policies.

George W. Bush (who just happens to be a governor) said that the credit should go to the governors because, he said, governors have more influence on such rates than the president.

I am quite certain that if the crime rate had risen instead of fallen, neither of these men would be so willing to claim credit. On the contrary, Gore would have blamed governors and Bush would have pointed to the

Clinton administration policies as being ineffective.

Can you imagine working for someone like this – whenever good things happen they take credit and whenever bad things happen they blame you? Wouldn't it be refreshing to hear a politician say, "I'm to blame."?

I'm tired of the attention we give to trivial issues instead of what matters in leadership. Recently, the Bush campaign was criticized for displaying the word "Rats" in an advertisement. The Gore campaign claimed it was "subliminal advertising."

So what if it was? Politicians say things just as insulting to one another's face. Now, instead of focusing on matters of importance, we are left observing an argument between two men because one allegedly called the other one a name.

Bob Dole lost his bid for president in part because he seemed too old. Bush's running mate, Dick Cheney, and Vice President Gore have been criticized because they are too lifeless. What does that have to do with being a good leader? Are we electing a president or a game-show host?

I'm convinced that parties are looking for a candidate who looks good "out front." Since the first televised campaigns, elections have been more about popularity than leadership. In 1960, Nixon lost to Kennedy in part because he looked terrible on TV. Stiff and pale, Nixon was no competition for the charismatic charm of the young John Kennedy. The Republican party was criticized during the last presidential election because it didn't field a more likeable candidate than Bob Dole. Shouldn't capability to lead be the real issue?

I'm tired of politicians who seem to wear a Teflon suit. Gary Hart faded into political obscurity after he was photographed on the boat "Monkey Business" with a babe in a bikini sitting in his lap. Yet Bill Clinton has a list of female companions a mile long and his approval ratings just keep going up. Ronald Reagan, perhaps one of our history's most popular presidents, got away with addressing the Iran Contra issue mostly with, "Golly, I don't remember."

Campaign advisors know that every blink, nod, and syllable will be judged as if those things make one a good leader rather than character and experience. Remember how President Bush was criticized for looking at his watch during a 1992 campaign debate? Impression management gets people elected, not competence. It is a tragedy that voters are so shallow.

All of this has made me cynical, and I don't think I'm alone. I do not believe anything any politician says unless it can be verified by a more reliable source. I do not believe any legislation or program is primarily for the people of the nation. Its primary purpose is to meet the personal agendas of the politicians, their parties, and their financial supporters. If the people of the country also benefit, that is simply a nice extra.

Those in office spend the majority of their time fund raising and ensuring that they, and their partisan colleagues, remain in office rather than working for the people who elected them. I have no hope that our system will improve because those within the system would have to police themselves. That isn't going to happen. Even when they pretend to make changes, those changes are cosmetic because they know the people will not look deeply enough to see that such changes are meaningless.

I hope I'm wrong, but I fear there are no honest men and women in our federal political system. I fear they seek office to fulfill their own personal agendas and/or to meet the objectives of the special interest groups to whom they pander. Good people who could be leaders are unwilling to get involved in our dysfunctional system. Frankly, where it should be a noble title, I would be embarrassed to tell someone I was a senator or

representative.

All of this wears me out because I love these United States. Men and women have died for this country and I benefit from the work of my courageous and selfless forefathers. In fact, the freedom to publish such a commentary as this without fear of governmental retribution is demonstrative of this great country. Perhaps the most frustrating thing of all is that our political system, flawed as it is, is the best in the world and I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. God bless this nation and its future.