

PROFESSIONAL POLITICIANS BEWARE!

Aaron Swartz

“By the power of exponents, just five levels of councils, each consisting of only fifty people, is enough to cover over three hundred million people.”

The government of a republic, James Madison wrote in Federalist No.39 (Conformity of the Plan to Republican Principles, 1788), must “be derived from the great body of the society, not from an inconsiderable proportion, or a favored class of it; otherwise a handful of tyrannical nobles, exercising their oppressions by a delegation of their powers, might aspire to the rank of republicans, and claim for their government the honorable title of republic.”

Looking at our government today—a House of professional politicians, a Senate filled with multimillionaires, a string of presidential family dynasties—it seems hard to maintain that our officials are in fact “derived from the great body of the society” and not “a favored class” merely posing as representatives of the people.

Unless politics is a tradition in your family, your odds of getting

elected to federal office are slim. And unless you're a white male lawyer, you rarely get to vote for someone like yourself in a national race. Nor, in reality, do we have an opportunity to choose policy positions: no major candidates support important proposals that most voters agree with, like single-payer health care.

Instead, national elections have been boiled down to simple binary choices, which advertising men and public relations teams reduce to pure emotions: Fear. (A bear prowls through the woods.) Hope. (The sun rises over a hill.) Vote Smith. Or maybe Jones.

Nor does the major media elevate the level of debate. Instead of substantive discussions about policy proposals and their effects, they spend their time on horse-race coverage (who's raised the most money? who's polling well in Ohio?) and petty scandals (how much did that haircut cost? was someone somewhere offended by that remark?)

The result after all this dumbing down? In 2004, voters who said they chose a presidential candidate based on the candidate's agendas, ideas, platforms, or goals comprised a whopping 10% of the electorate. So it's not too surprising when political scientists find that voters' decisions can be explained by such random factors as whether they like red or blue, whether the economy is good or bad, or whether the current party has been in office for long or not.

Aside from the occasional telephone poll, the opinions of "the great body of the society" have been edited out of the picture. Way back in Federalist No. 10 (The Utility of the Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection (continued), 1787), Madison put his finger on the reason. "However small the republic may be," he noted, "the representatives must be raised to a certain number, in order to guard against the cabals of a few." But similarly, "however large it may be, they must be limited to a certain number, in order to guard against the confusion of a multitude."

The result is that the population grows while the number of rep-

representatives stays fixed, leaving each politician to represent more and more people. The first Congress had a House of 65 members representing 40,000 voters and three million citizens (they had a whopping 1.3% voter turnout back then). That's a representative for around every 600 voters or 46,000 citizens (the size of the average baseball stadium). A baseball stadium may be a bit of an unruly mob, but it's not unimaginably large.

Today, by contrast, we have 435 representatives and 300 million citizens—one for roughly every 700,000 citizens. There isn't a stadium in the world big enough to hold that many people. It's a number more akin to a television audience (it's about how many people tune in to watch Keith Olbermann each night).

Which is exactly what the modern constituency has become: the TV audience following along at home. Even if you wanted to, you can't have a real conversation with a TV audience. It is too big to convey a sense of what each individual is thinking. Instead of a group to represent, it's a mob to be managed.



I agree with Madison that there is roughly a right size for a group of representatives “on both sides of which inconveniences will be found to lie. By enlarging too much the number of electors, you render the representatives too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests; as by reducing it too much, you render him unduly attached to these, and too little fit to comprehend and pursue great and national objects.”

But what Madison missed is that there is no similar limit on the number of such groups. To take a technological analogy, the Internet is, at bottom, an enormous collection of wires. Yet nobody would ever think of it this way. Instead, we group the wires into chips and the

chips into computers and the computers into networks and the networks into the Internet. And people only deal with things at each level: when the computer breaks, we can't identify which wire failed; we take the whole thing into the shop.

One of the most compelling visions for rebooting democracy adopts this system of abstraction for politics. Parpolity, developed by the political scientist Stephen Shalom, would build a legislature out of a hierarchical series of nested councils. Agreeing with Madison, he says each council should be small enough that everyone can engage in face-to-face discussion but large enough that there is a diversity of opinion and the number of councils is minimized. He estimates the right size is 25 to 50 people.

So, to begin with, let us imagine a council of you and your 40 closest neighbors—perhaps the other people in your apartment building or on your block. You get together every so often to discuss the issues that concern you and your neighborhood. And you may vote to set policy for the area which the council covers.

But your council has another function: it selects one of its own to send as a representative to the next council up. There the process repeats itself: the representative from your block and its 40 closest neighbors meet every so often to discuss the political issues that concern the area. And, of course, your representative reports back to the group, gets your recommendations on difficult questions, and takes suggestions for issues to raise at the next area council meeting.

By the power of exponents, just five levels of councils, each consisting of only fifty people, is enough to cover over three hundred million people. But—and this is the truly clever bit—at the area council the whole process repeats itself. Just as each block council nominates a representative to the area council, each area council nominates a representative to the city council, and each city council to the state council, each state council to the national council, and so on.

Shalom discusses a number of further details—provisions for vot-

ing, recalls, and delegation—but it's the idea of nesting that's key. Under such a system, there are only four representatives who stand between you and the people setting national policy, each of whom is forced to account to their constituents in regular, small face-to-face meetings. Politicians in such a system could not be elected through empty appeals to mass emotions. Instead, they would have to sit down, face-to-face, with a council of their peers and persuade them that they are best suited to represent their interests and positions.



There is something rather old-fashioned about this notion of sitting down with one's fellow citizens and rationally discussing the issues of the day. But there is also something exciting and new about it. In the same way that blogs have given everyone a chance to be a publisher, Wikipedia lets everyone be an encyclopedia author, and YouTube lets anyone be a television producer, Parpolity would let everyone be a politician.

The Internet has shown us that the pool of people with talent far outnumbers the few with the background, connections, and wealth to get to a place in society where they can practice their talents professionally. (It also shows us that many people with those connections aren't particularly talented.)

The democratic power of the Net means you don't need connections to succeed. In a world where kids can be television stars just by finding a video camera and an Internet connection, citizens may begin to wonder why getting into politics is so much harder.

For many years, politicians had a ready excuse: politics was a difficult job, which required carefully weighing and evaluating evidence and making difficult decisions. Only a select few could be trusted to perform it; the vast majority of the population was woefully under-

qualified.

And perhaps in the era of a cozy relationship between politicians and the press, this illusion could be sustained. But as netroots activists and blogs push our national conversation ever closer to the real world, this excuse is becoming laughable. After all, these men and women of supposedly sober judgment voted overwhelmingly for disasters like the Iraq War. “No one could have ever predicted this,” TV’s talking heads all insist. No one, that is, except the great body of society, whose insistence that Iraq did not pose a threat and that an occupation would be long and brutal went ignored.

New online tools for interaction and collaboration have let people come together across space and time to build amazing things. As the Internet breaks down the last justifications for a professional class of politicians, it also builds up the tools for replacing them. For the most part, their efforts have so far been focused on education and entertainment, but it’s only a matter of time before they turn to politics. And when they do, professional politicians beware!

About the Author

Aaron Swartz is a hacker, writer, and activist. His latest project is watchdog.net, a website that holds politicians accountable.