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Editor's Notebook: Presidential Politics and The Rites of Spring

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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Presidential Politics and The Rites of Spring

Now that we are slowly emerging from the doldrums of winter, the signs of life and activity that coincide with the coming of spring are in evidence. As usual the birds are back, the jonquils are in bloom and the days are longer. But spring also brings with it some other changes. The Red Sox once again begin their yearly search for the holy grail of baseball; school children and collegians make their annual trek to Disney World or Ft. Lauderdale, and of course there is always the date with the tax collector.

This year though, there is a new sign of spring, a search somewhat akin to that of the Red Sox, but much more serious and important. This spring we begin the search for the next President of the United States. Now before you say, "but that's not until 1984," let's take a further look at this newest sign of spring.

It is now approximately twenty months till the presidential elections in November of 1984. And yet Americans are beginning to be treated to what is becoming an endless campaign for the highest office in the land. Already we have seen Ted Kennedy decide not to participate in this two year enterprise, ostensibly at the wishes of his family, but according to some cynics in order to avoid the embarrassment of defeat.

The departure of Kennedy only temporarily quieted the Democratic camp. Party leaders scurried about to find suitable replacements to continue the journey. It was not a difficult search, for the likes of Mondale, Glenn, Cranston, Hart, Hollings and Bumpers were more than eager to position themselves early for the big push starting next winter in New Hampshire. Most of the hopefuls have already established campaign committees and collected the \$100,000 required for them to receive matching funds from the Federal Elections Commission.

Of course on the other side the Republicans are eagerly awaiting the announcement of President Reagan to seek a second term in office. Should Mr. Reagan listen to his wife rather than his advisers and retire to his ranch, then the Republicans will also begin the rites of spring as George Bush, Howard Baker, Richard Lugar,

Jack Kemp and maybe even John Anderson jockey for position.

Since the American public will be deluged for the next twenty months with speeches, press conferences, interviews, rallies, advertisements and an endless stream of television analysis, it is essential to step back at this early stage and ask what it's all for,



"The County Election," by George Caleb Bingham.

and more importantly, what is this endless campaign doing to the democratic process of electing a president?

Perhaps the most distressing aspect of this presidential hype is that all the candidates, all the money (\$275 million in 1980) and all the media coverage has dulled the electoral senses of the American public. It is a well-known fact that we in the United States have the lowest voter turnout of any of the so-called advanced industrial democracies (53% in 1980). Somewhere along the way we seem to have lost the point of presidential elections.

Elections for the top office in this country are less a means of encouraging citizen participation than a means of employing consultants, testing advertising techniques, packaging candidates, and polling voters. We are at the stage now where the candidates are active and spirited, but the citizenry is tired, disillusioned and, unfortunately, bored.

The process of running for the top office in the country need not be lengthy, costly and anesthetizing. It may be helpful to investigate how other democratic countries conduct their elections. The results would clearly show that England, France, Canada, Germany and many others elect national leaders in a much shorter period of time, at a fraction of the cost, without superficiality and blatant egoism and most importantly without losing the interest of the voting public.

The problem of presidential overkill has finally become a concern among a broad spectrum of civic groups, academicians, some media people and yes, even the politicians. All are beginning to recognize that it is much easier to run this country with a committed and informed public rather

than a mass of apathetic or cynical citizens.

Consequently, discussion has intensified with respect to establishing regional primaries (instead of the distinct and disjointed pre-elections at present), instituting a two-day voting period (preferably a Saturday and Sunday in spring) placing a further cap on campaign expenses and requiring more informal citizen-oriented debates.

Don't look for these changes in 1984, but if turnout continues to drop and boredom escalates, American politics may be forced to change in order to maintain a viable democratic system. It would be nice someday to be as excited about the presidential elections as we are about the coming of spring and the beginning of baseball season.

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