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Editor's Notebook: The World's Greatest Democracy?

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Campaign 2000 will forever be known as the election that brought America a democratic language that was largely unknown and unused. Hand recounts, pregnant chads, vote certification, under-voting, canvassing boards and butterfly ballots have now permanently entered the lexicon of national politics. But while George Bush and Al Gore fought over every last ballot in Florida and the news networks turned a constitutional crisis into a media circus, many of the essential elements of this year’s national election were left unreported. Let’s take a look at what happened in Campaign 2000 before the fight for Florida began.

1. Democracy is not Cheap – George W. Bush raised $187 million and Al Gore nearly matched him with $133 million, and that’s just from the first primary through the last weeks of the campaign. Add to this the nearly $400 million raised by both political parties (so-called soft money) and the enormity of the cost associated with electing a president comes into focus. Over $4 billion was spent on all campaigns in 1996. In 2000 that amount should easily double. Most European countries accomplish the same end for a lot less money, but in the United States elections have become a kind of cottage industry that employs thousands of people. Talk of campaign finance reform is just that, talk. There are just too many people making money trying to get out the vote.

2. The Messenger Rather Than the Message – In Campaign 2000 the American public was bombarded with issue positions on everything from Social Security to prescription drugs to tax relief. But no matter how much Bush and Gore laid out their views on how they would change America, the voters were looking beyond the issues and trying to determine which of these two guys was a better man to occupy the White House. Electoral victory hinged on who had the horsepower, the experience, the veracity; who tended to exaggerate, who engaged in youthful indiscretions, who was a phony, who was arrogant and most of all who possessed the most common sense. American voters are certainly smart enough to know the broad generalities of key public policy issues, but they also want to know that the man who enters the White House will not disappoint them or worse yet embarrass them.

3. Demographics Makes the Difference – This may be the United States of America, but when it comes to elections it is the male vs. the female vote, getting out the African American and Hispanic vote, winning over the suburban electorate, widening the union base, and convincing the all important senior constituency. Campaigns are individual appeals to individual demographic groupings within individual states. Candidates may claim that they are talking to the American people, but they are really talking to voters who their polling has told them hold the key to victories. Winning elections is thus putting together scores of mini-elections. The election victor is thus the president of a narrow demographic alliance.

4. Voting Does Matter – The 2000 election should finally put the rest the oft-repeated phrase, “my vote doesn’t count.” The razor-thin popular vote for president and the votes in Florida, New Mexico, Oregon and Wisconsin point clearly to the importance of the vote. But while all attention focused on the narrow margins of victory in key states, the most distressing story was that voter turnout remained around 50%. This country continues to suffer from enormous voter apathy, particularly among the young. This election might not have had two knights in shining armor, but the issues they talked about go to the heart of our future as a nation. Perhaps the scrumming around for every last vote in Florida and other states may be the spur that gets Americans off their easy chair and into the ballot booth.

Most of the foreign press corps who were in the United States for Campaign 2000 often were found scratching their heads when they saw this “organized chaos” we call electing a president. They were offended by the hoopla, the lawyers, the grand promises and the constant barrage of television commercials. They can’t understand the reason for the Electoral College and our unwillingness to move away from the two party system. It all seems so disorganized, so personal, so rancorous and oh so long. The only answer to all this head scratching and bafflement is that it is our way of electing the most powerful man in the world, and its unlikely to change. That’s not a very good defense of the electoral process in the “World’s Greatest Democracy” but since most Americans either don’t care or seem satisfied with this “organized chaos,” Campaign 2004 will likely be the same, only more costly, more mean-spirited and more factionalized.

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