

ARE INDEPENDENTS ACCRUING POLITICAL POWER?

In the run-up to the presidential election, the number of voters who call themselves independent is swelling. Both Barack Obama and John McCain can trace their primary victories largely to independents. At the same time, millions of Republicans and Democrats crossed over to vote in the other party's primary. Doubtless, the presidential election will swing on these voters.

So, you might think that those who are independent, or at least unattached enough to switch parties on occasion, would accrue more political power as their ranks grow. Think again.

Perhaps nothing threatens independents more—and makes government less viable—than the extraordinary politicization of government's decisionmaking apparatus. New York University Professor Paul Light looks askance at the number of presidential appointees, which has risen from about 400 under John F. Kennedy to about 3,000 today. With every loyalist tapped—big thank-yous for campaign contributions and party work—a potential pragmatist who answers to all Americans loses a position in government, replaced by someone who has two masters: the public and the party.

Consider. Has either presumptive presidential nominee suggested that

- ambassadorships no longer be for sale on the basis of political contributions, much less that most newly appointed ambassadors should be steeped in the history, language, and economics of the countries to which they are assigned?
- the vast numbers of political appointees—not just in the executive branch, but in the White House itself—be pared down, particularly positions designed to appease constituencies in the interest of their political party, not the nation?
- department and agency heads be empowered to act in what they view as the public interest without having to run the political gauntlet at the White House?
- the White House no longer ask potential appointees whom they voted for—an unethical, if not illegal, practice that violates the spirit of the confidential ballot box?
- political contributions would not and should not help determine who can best serve the public in any particular government job?
- potential appointees be asked, first and foremost, what they hope to accomplish and how?
- Congress strengthen its bipartisan staffs (e.g., Congressional Budget Office, Government Accountability Office, Joint Committee on Taxation) relative to its partisan staffs, who too often spend time trying to score points against the other party while the problem at hand festers?

In campaigns, contributors and unpledged delegates are continually brow-beaten—urged to get on the candidate's train now, on pain of being overlooked when the time comes to bestow favors and appointments. Indeed, this classic campaign ploy essentially assures that government resources will be taken away from independents and others who don't work for the party in power.

It's not just that favors often cost tax dollars. When less qualified people end up running the government agencies, the public pays an even higher price in poorly administered programs and badly developed policies.

Just since 2000, we've witnessed scandals, abuse, and incompetence. Fodder for tabloids, the downfalls of the department and agency heads at Justice, Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the General Services Administration, the Smithsonian, and others can only further disillusion an already-wary public, never mind the civil servants who report to disgraced officials.

You'd think that our elected officials would realize that the pervasiveness of this problem means that it is systemic, not simply the consequence of some bad choices here and there. Where political considerations and loyalties trump qualifications and commitment to public service, governance inevitably loses some of its vitality.

Yet, each political party seems to think that only the other one engages in these abuses. New winners of political office conveniently believe that their friends and campaign supporters will somehow be different. Witness the display of good sense these cronies showed in supporting the right person for the office! Small wonder the vicious cycle goes on and on.

Once a new president limits appointments mainly to steadfast political supporters, most of the population—no matter how dedicated or talented—is out of the game. Those from the opposite party certainly don't stand a chance. Ditto for independents. And, usually, ditto for strict nonpartisans who think more about getting the job done than currying favor.

Politics, of course, has a vital role to play in our democracy. But it requires guts for a politician to admit how far the current system encourages him to use a misshapen talent pool to retain power.

A new president who puts country before party must put much greater weight on seeking those whose primary skills are in serving the public. He or she must simultaneously launch civil service reforms that cut back on political appointees in the executive and legislative branches, take most of the personnel search out of the hands of political operatives, and establish a stronger job-vetting process throughout government.

Independents, don't hold your breath. Candidates, please surprise us all.