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Editor's Watch

If It's a Horse Race, Why Not More Than Two Horses?

Speculation about a possible third-party—or independent—candidate for president in 2008 has been fueled by the decision of New York's mayor, Michael Bloomberg, to leave the Republican Party and become an independent. After all, polls show that American citizens are unhappy with President Bush and Congress and are not yet convinced that any of the current Republican and Democratic presidential candidates is the one we need. So why not have an independent candidate in 2008 as we did in 1992 with Ross Perot?

The problem with this scenario is that the reason why many voters are not happy with the status quo is that Congress and the president can't overcome the increasing polarization of the country over issues such as immigration reform, American engagement in Iraq, health-care insurance, abortion, the environment, and more. So an independent candidate will have to do more than just castigate other candidates and the two major parties for their failures and inadequacies. He or she will have to make a compelling case for how to address major challenges and convince voters that he or she can bring a divided Congress together. And that is a very tall order indeed.

From my point of view, there should always be more than two candidates (more than two horses) in a big race. And one of the best ways to make that possible would be to change our presidential election into a two-stage race. In the first stage, allow many candidates from multiple parties to run and make their case. And if none of them wins a majority of the votes, then move to the second stage—a run-off election between the top two vote-getters. Not only would this allow more candidates and more parties to articulate their views and promote civic debate, it would also lead to increased attentiveness on the part of a newly elected president to the reasons for the appeal of the candidates who came in second, third, and fourth in the first stage.

What we need most, however, is not just another way to organize the race, but for citizens and the media to focus their attention on the real purpose of politics, on the task of government, on the reason we elect candidates to public office, and on how the president and Congress should deal with the country's most important challenges. Sadly, this is not what happens today. Partly because candidates have to raise millions of dollars to spend on almost empty campaign ads, the horse race begins earlier and earlier with more and more maneuvering and less and less substantive public debate taking place. Greater and greater exaggeration builds as candidates attack each other, trying to secure the tiniest advantage over the others in order to win. Most citizens simply tune out the "noise."

By the time we get to the election in November, 2008—still 17 months away—the public and the media will be more interested in which horse wins than in what the winning candidate will do after being sworn into office. In fact, the strange thing is that American voters appear to be more and more skeptical about Washington's ability to get anything done even if they tune into the election returns to find out who wins.

Indeed, we need more candidates and a wider scope of political debate about the future of governance in the United States. But more than that, we need civic engagement of a kind that can help discipline candidates, deepen political argument, and lead to better government in Washington. If the horse race remains just a horse race, then what does it matter if the winner defeats twelve other horses, or only one?

—The Editor[©]