

Sun Journal

Columns & Analysis
Sunday, Oct 14, 2012

Democracy belongs to those who show up

By Ben McCollister

It was Game 7 of the American League Championship in 2003.

The Red Sox led the Yankees 5-2 in the eighth inning. The Yankees were able to score three runs off a very tired Pedro Martinez to tie the game. A solo home run in the 11th inning won the game for the Yankees.

As much as any other moment, this truly conveys what it is to be a Sox fan. The inevitable acceptance of loss, the feeling that there is always next season, and that in the meanwhile we will cheer for whichever team beats the Yankees.

I feel the same way about politics today. I am frustrated that politicians can all agree on what the problems are, yet cannot find and implement solutions. I am irritated that special interests have such a tight grip on our government. I am discouraged that lobbyists in Washington and Augusta have out-sized influence over our elected officials.

As with a terrible baseball season, we voters/fans need to declare the season over and start looking ahead to the next one.

Election Day is Nov. 6, and that is our best chance to set things right. This is no time to be a lazy voter. We must do more than “throw the bums out” or choose “the lesser of two evils.”

We need to do something really radical, and that is to put ourselves right at the center of the election.

It is time to take Justice Louis Brandeis to heart. He said, “The most important political office is that of the private citizen,” and I think that is right.

We have just over three weeks to reach out to candidates who seek to represent us and let them know that we need to get this state and this country on a better track. We need to agree on some big changes to ensure the long-term success of our representative democracy. We need to find out, when it comes to the fundamental issues of our elections and our governance, whose side are they on?

Do they stand with the five-member majority on the U.S. Supreme Court who believe that the unfettered spending of corporate money in elections is demanded by the Constitution?

Or do they believe, as I do, that the unchecked flow of special interest money into elections is a big problem?

In my view, the U.S. Supreme Court has done this country a great disservice. Under Chief Justice Roberts, revisiting long-held precedents in cases such as Citizens United v. FEC has been a priority of the court. The result is a steady erosion of legislative reforms of campaign finance, all aiming toward the same goal: an unregulated free-for-all of spending in campaigns.

I am all for free speech, but I don't think elections suffered from a dearth of money or advertising prior to Citizens United. And I don't think the avalanche of outside spending in the current cycle is creating a more informed electorate. The question for candidates is, now that a century's worth of reform has largely been set aside, what is next?

Maine has been ahead of the curve on campaign reform, and we have enjoyed the many benefits of the Clean Election system for more than 10 years. But the 125th Legislature weakened the system, making it less viable for candidates in hotly contested races. The same Legislature also gutted money for the program in the budget.

So I will ask state candidates whether they support restoring the Clean Election system and the Clean Election Fund so that this citizen-initiated law can work as voters intended.

Without fans there would be no baseball; and without citizen involvement, there is no democracy. It is not enough to shrug our shoulders and wait for next season. It is up to us to force a much-needed discussion about whether money equals speech; whether corporations have the same free speech rights as people; and whether voters have the right to know who is behind election ads.

With the election on the horizon, voters must bring these big, fundamental issues to the candidates.

Unlike baseball, politics is not a spectator sport. As the old adage goes: Democracy belongs to those who show up.

Ben McCollister is the former chairman of the SAD 21 Board of Directors. He has served as a selectman in Canton. A long-time resident of Canton, he works as a systems analyst for the state of Maine DAFS/OIT.