

Earl Raab

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COFFEE, TEA OR MILK?

At national Jewish conventions these days, there is a lot of conversation along these lines: "Who are you going to vote for?" "How can I vote for Carter?" "How can you vote for Reagan?" "What does Anderson really stand for?"

A few people are already resolute in their judgment. But most of them spend a lot of time shaking their heads. There's an old Zen line: if you have only two choices, take a third. Or, in this case: if you have only three choices, take a fourth. At least that's the mood right now.

Then, there's the variation on the current Israeli joke, transferred to America. One American, Goldstein, tells his friend that he is going to leave this country and go into exile. He says he has two good reasons for that drastic action. His shocked friend asks him what the reasons are. The first reason, says Goldstein, is that Carter is bound to be defeated in the next election, and he, Goldstein, couldn't stand it if either Reagan or Anderson were president. But, the friend protests, don't give up so easily; Carter might pull it out and become the president again. That, says Goldstein, is the second reason.

No one will go into exile, but an unusual number of people will stay away from the polls, as things stand. This fix is partly the result of "democratic reforms." In direct primaries, the candidates announce themselves and then go to the people, via TV, to say: "Take me or leave me." Jones may get 40 per cent of the Party vote, Group A, and become the candidate. But 32 per cent of Party voters, Group B, voted for Smith and absolutely can't stand Jones.

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Now, if some people from Group A and some people from Group B had conferred to begin with, they may have decided that a third man, Brown, would be the best candidate to win for the Party because, while he might not be the first choice of either Group A or Group B, he would be acceptable to both groups. And he would go into the campaign recognizing some responsibility all groups involved.

That's the way American politics used to work. It may have needed reform; but we may have over-reformed, to the point where more people will regularly feel that they have no acceptable options, they are disenfranchised. That, in turn, might lead to more party fragmentation, one-issue politics, factionalism and goodbye Madisonian democracy.

There would be another result, of more parochial interest. Jews constitute perhaps 4 per cent of the voting public. Except in a couple of concentrated places, at a couple of times in American history, the "Jewish vote" has not been crucial. Infinitely more influential has been the fact that perhaps one-quarter of the hard-core "Party activists" have been Jews. They are the ones, because of their intense political participation, who helped shape programs. With the decline or fragmentation of the parties, that picture would change.

There are reasons other than Party deterioration for the current quandary of many voters. But it is a critical time for people concerned with American democracy to get more actively involved in politics; and among other things, to help reform us back in the direction of negotiation politics.

In the meantime, it is just as well to remember that people who don't go to the polls are voting with their feet, and may be voting for the candidate they like least. Almost everybody, with a little more thinking than usual, can decide that one candidate is somewhat preferable to the other, in balance. Even that small margin of preferability may be important in the fateful four years coming up.

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