

Presidential Election Time: Disenfranchising the Margins in a Democratic Moment

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Presidential election cycles bring to relief the fragile nature of the social fabric. More than the election of the head of state and the post-election celebrations of political gains and policy promises that rarely become enacted, the election cycles illuminate the realities of those who, in spite of representing a significant percentage of our nation's population, remain at the margins of political and social power. National elections show the ways in which the fabric of our society is tattered—it may not be beyond repair, but it is certainly in need of mending. The complex reality of the ills that affect our national social fabric are put on display from the start of the primaries, through the debates, all the way to election day and its aftermath; communities at the margins whose vote campaign strategists covet do not figure at the center of political discourse. Often portrayed as abusing the largesse of the bounty of America, an imaginary construct at best, communities at the margins of political, economic, and social power see very little change to their day-to-day livelihood, even if their existence is inextricably bound with the nation's own.

Candidates usually hail from those sectors with the economic muscle needed to construct electable personae. Manufacturing an electable candidate proves a profitable gamble; potentially, getting one's candidate in place may shift the structure of economic and political arrangements securing one's desires. The potential payoff, thus, makes a political exigency of the courting of those with the highest political, social, and economic capital even if their numbers are the least. A way to think of this is how wealth inequality is understood by the average American. In a recent interview with NPR, Michael Norton, Associate Professor of Business at

Harvard University explained that the average American citizen underestimates the economic inequality gap. Most Americans don't phantom the reality that the top 1% holds 85% of the national wealth, while 40% of the population has a networth of zero.¹ The correlation between economic power and the ability to influence the workings of national government are clearly evident in the presidential debates.

Presidential debates are opportunities to showcase the vision a candidate's party has for the nation. These events rarely focus on those issues that impact the day-to-day life worlds of the working folks, like accessible daycare; adequate, consistent, and affordable health care; reforming primary and secondary public education; the school-to-prison pipeline; care of the elderly; veterans' reintegration into civilian life; and employment conducive not to subsistence living but to flourishing. Instead, the concerns of the numerical smallest but most powerful in terms of the reach of their economic power dictate what is most relevant for conversation, while at the same time inciting distractions by bringing flammable issues to discussion. For example, the issue of abortion, and the role of the Supreme Court in protecting the right to choose, continues to be a relevant issue in every presidential election. Nevertheless, *Fisher v. University of Texas*, a case currently in the Supreme Court that can potentially end Affirmative Action in Higher Education, received no attention. What would be the consequences for the educational futures of communities of color if this case spells the end of Affirmative Action? When we consider this possible threat in light of the national high school dropout rates of the two largest minority groups—African Americans and Latinos/as with 43% and 42% respectively—access to education could be framed as a human rights issue. If to these we were also to add the high percentage of incarcerated people of color, it is alarming that the ongoing creation of an underclass is not a topic lifted up by presidential debates. The impact of mass incarceration in

¹ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130395070&ps=cprs>

communities of color is another topic not debated. Shouldn't we hear our presidential candidates engage the grim realities and devastating effects of mass incarceration for communities of color? Should they not openly address the fact that among males of color, 1 in 15 African Americans and 1 in 36 Latinos/Hispanic over the age of 18 are incarcerated in contrast to 1 in 106 white males?²

Even the ability to cast a vote, the pinnacle of democratic participation, increasingly becomes a laborious journey for those whose voices are heard the least, those who bear the brunt of the cost of being the United States of America. In a recent report concerning the 2012 election produced by The *Brennan Center for Justice* at New York University School of Law the following worrisome reality surfaced: at the present moment fourteen states have passed restrictive voting laws.³ These fourteen states represent 68% of the Electoral College votes needed to win the presidential election. Furthermore, in a 2006 survey carried out by the Center studying the ability of individuals to provide proof of citizenship, the Center reported that approximately 7% (around 13 million individuals) of American citizens do not possess ready proof of their citizenship.⁴ In fact, if an individual earns \$25,000 or less—and around 12% of voting eligible citizens fall in this range—he or she is more likely not to possess the necessary documentation. The elderly and citizens of color are particularly vulnerable in this regard; 18% and 25% of these populations respectively would not meet the proof requirement established by restrictive voting laws. Keeping in mind that the Center's survey was conducted in 2006 and most of the restrictive voting laws were passed in 2011, we could expect that the situation may in fact have worsened. The projection today is worse as states on the east coast battle the aftermath

² http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/sentencing_and_corrections/one_in_100.pdf

³ http://www.brennancenter.org/content/section/category/voting_rights_elections/

⁴ "Citizens Without Proof: A Survey of the American's Possession of Documentary Proof of Citizenship and Photo Identification," http://www.brennancenter.org/page/-/d/download_file_39242.pdf

of Hurricane Sandy. What would this mean to our democracy?

Let's return to the presidential electoral cycles as good barometers of how we imagine our national collective existence. It would be pertinent to ask in this regard who receives the most political attention? Joe the Plumber? The 99%? The 47%? The rapidly disappearing middle class with earnings of \$250,000 and below? The propaganda artistry of campaign managers allows for new and creative ways to exploit a candidate's missteps, question the circumstances surrounding every photo-op, and even now the new pundit maneuvering of *fact-checking* as a way to bolster candidate's popularity over an opponent. Thus, the public space necessary for serious debate is shaped by the sound bites, Twitter-facts, and photoshopped images fabricated in virtual space, leaving the issues impacting the social and economic life of the marginalized undiscussed.

What preoccupies me the most is that election cycles bring to the fore the perennial vulnerability of and lack of social concern for those at the poverty or near-poverty level. The elderly, those in need of social services, and those that remain on the shadowy side of the American Dream: the working poor; those who get up everyday and manage meager resources to maintain households, family, and community; those who are not too far away from economic calamity. That segment of our national population remains unspoken for. In a moment of national catastrophe brought on by Hurricane Sandy, it is this population, yet again, who carries the brunt of the weight of our ways of living. Their livelihood has been threatened and now they may be politically disenfranchised. This segment of the population, although unable to capture the political attention of the national scene, consistently is the segment used to cash-in political capital.

The ravages of Hurricane Sandy brought this to the fore. Could a national election be put on hold to ensure the participation of millions of civilians impacted? The politically agile did jump on the occasion to cash-in on this. Even Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey, who tends to be outspoken, should have given more thought to his responses to the storm's impact on the election before a crass rejoinder that makes his sentiments clear—*Why would I care about an election now?* It seems to be part of the American spirit to assume that showing a strong face is what the nation needs at all times, even during times of calamity. The voting gap—the poor, the working poor, citizens of color, and the elderly—often face difficulties in making it to the polls. They are not represented by the candidates; they appear not in national debates, and yet, they are a significant part of the fabric of our society. If we were to embrace the view that our moral character as a nation shows itself in how we make it possible for the most vulnerable to fully participate in our national life, we would come face to face with the startling realization that we have missed a step.