

## Our Awesome Responsibility

The election season is reaching its home stretch, and for many people, it can't be over fast enough. Just wake me up and tell me who won. Such a sentiment, though, has less to do with the campaign's length than with its quality. It seems that the election of the most powerful person in the world has precious little to do with candidates' policies—at least a lot less than it should. And I can't help but ask myself, isn't the greatest democracy in the world worthy of something better than the character of politics we currently have?

Everyone can share responsibility for the current state of our affairs, even the voter. It seems that most people don't vote based on explicitly rational reasons. Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist and Eric Schickler argue in their book, *Partisan Hearts and Minds*, that people tend to vote as their parents did. That's not surprising, as we all learn values from our folks. But people also develop stereotypes of people who belong to different parties, and vote for the candidates with whom they can most identify. In short, these authors find party affiliation to be more like membership in a social club or religious group.

Similarly, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has observed that our politics is more tribal than rational. Americans establish their political affiliations and then filter their perceptions of reality through that highly partisan lens. For example, if you are a Republican you're more likely to think that Ronald Reagan was a great tax cutter—when in fact Reagan raised taxes on more people and as a larger percentage of our economy than Bill Clinton did. People will even vote contrary to their own values and interests for the sake of having a leader to whom they can relate—as leader of the tribe, so to speak.

Among other reasons for voting: People usually vote for the candidates who are taller, and for ones with homier personalities. A slight majority of people will also vote for the incumbent president when the country is at war—even if the war is unjustified.

Of course, presidential candidates and their handlers have done little to give voters a more reasonable basis on which make choices. Even if one wanted to vote based on facts, it takes more effort than it should to find them. One of the most telling developments this year has been the rise of fact-check features on post-debate coverage. With candidates so willing to distort reality for the sake of partisanship, it becomes easier for voters to rely more on inherited stereotypes and perceptions unrelated to policies and platforms. For example, one voter in Iowa was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that John Kerry turned her off because of his way of speaking.

The techniques of the presidential campaign seem more designed to reinforce negative stereotypes and personality qualities as a way to rally the party and draw more members to its side. This makes the election as much about marketing as about platforms. It seems, then, that the candidate with the better personality and public relations firm has at least as strong a chance as the candidate with the most ethically defensible policies. And the marketing of a candidate depends on money—lots of it.

Democracy is not healthy under such conditions. Too much is at stake in the world for candidates not to be straightforward, and for voters to rely merely on party allegiance. To be sure, there are many good candidates running for office at all levels because they believe in honest public service. They make our job easier, and they should be commended. But as the stakes get higher, our job gets tougher. What can we do?

The challenge for the voter is to look past the techniques of political marketing to see what really matters. Policies *do* make a difference. Exercising true choice and asserting individuality means being mindful of the lenses through which we have come to interpret the world and asking ourselves how they may be distorting the truth. In some sense, we *all* ought to become independents, even if just for election day.

We also have to call our political leaders to account. Where democracy is being hindered—as it currently is by such moves as voter suppression, deception, and policies developed for big money donors—we need to speak up.

Our biggest responsibility is to vote for the candidates who best promote the values of democracy and the common good. We, the holders of our great democratic experiment, have an awesome responsibility to keep the government worthy of its people.

This is Mark Hanson of the Practical Ethics Center at the University of Montana