

## CONSIDER THIS:

### #55 All Politics are Tribal:

### The Myth of “One Citizen, One Vote”

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Certainly the concept of “one citizen, one vote” must be the bedrock upon which all democratic theory and protections are based. Indeed, any government would presumably have to grant the validity of this tenet, lest its own validity be questioned. After all, at the end of the day, when all else is stripped away, the debatable and the subjective, the polemical and the political, is this not the one undeniable standard upon which everyone must agree, the fundamental principle

of natural law that philosophers of any persuasion must certainly unite in supporting?

And yet...

Down through the millennia and even into the present, this simple, seemingly irrefutable standard of equality and representative government has proven to be almost impossible to establish in any democracy as a practical fact.

Now why, exactly, must this be? First, let’s consider the evidence, using the United States as an example, and beginning, as they say, at the beginning. Which in this case is the Declaration of Independence. The ringing and splendid language of that document includes the following:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

There seems to be a troublesome word in that otherwise inspirational cornerstone of liberty, however. That word, of course, is “men”, and the Founding (*note bene*) Fathers used that term advisedly. Male slaves need not apply for voting rights, either. And, as time would tell, a variety of other impediments to exercise one’s

democratic rights would be erected as well, including property and education restrictions, poll taxes, and more.

Only incrementally (one might say grudgingly) and across the gulf of almost two centuries of ostensibly democratic government did even the nominal reality of "one citizen, one vote" come into gradual focus, first with the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, in 1870, which sought to bar the States from using an individual's race, color or prior status as a slave as a bar to exercising the right to vote. Next came the Nineteenth Amendment, extending the franchise to women – but not until 1920. Then the Twenty-Third Amendment came to the rescue of the citizens of the District of Columbia, giving them in 1961, granting them a number of Electoral College votes equal to those held by the least populous state. Poll taxes were not outlawed until the enactment of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, in 1964, in connection with a series of long-overdue and much needed voting rights laws that sought to finally extend equal voting rights in fact, as well as constitutionally, to all, and particularly to those of color. The final voting related Constitutional amendment (to date) lowered the voting age to 18, in 1971.

So there we are, at last, yes?

But in fact, no. Why? Because next we must look at what happens after we cast our vote, and for whom.

At the national level, we have three primary rights: to vote for members of the lower house of Congress (the House of Representatives) and for the upper house (the Senate), and also for the President. Our right to be represented in the lower house comes arithmetically closest to achieving the ideal of one citizen, one vote, since the 435 seats in that house are apportioned (and decennially reapportioned) based on population. But the Senate is populated by two representatives from each state, from the smallest (Wyoming, with just 493,782 citizens in 2000) to the largest (California, with 33,871,648 in the same year).

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Thus, while the tiny population of Wyoming had but a single representative in the House compared to mighty California's 53, it enjoyed the vocal support of the same number of senators as its giant near-neighbor. By that measure, the vote of a single citizen hailing from the windswept plains of Wyoming on November 4 of this year was equivalent to almost 70 voters visiting the polls in sunny California. One citizen, one vote indeed.

And what of the presidency? There, of course, we encounter that quaint artifact of Colonial times known as the Electoral College, which can, and more than once has, elected a president that did not garner the majority of the popular vote (it used to be even worse, but don't ask).

So how did we get to where we are today, and does it matter?

At the heart of the matter, I believe, is the question of how we apply the simple word "us." If everyone within a given polity identified closely with every other citizen in that same political unit, then each would be likely to trust every other citizen equally, and therefore be willing to cede equal influence to them over their own destiny.

The problem, of course, is that people don't. Instead, consciously or unconsciously we subdivide the population into a small number of "us" and a variety of other groups that by definition become "them." The bigger, more diverse, and more geographically distributed the pool of voters, the more types and the less familiar the nature of the pools of "them" become, if only through ignorance and suspicion. And once we have separated a national pool of voters into us and them, we begin to worry about how we will protect "us" against the suspect motives and goals of "them." The rest, as they say, is history (in this case electoral).

The concept of us and them extends back into the dimmest reaches of time, when bands of closely related hunter gatherers needed to rely upon each other utterly for their very survival. Occasionally, such a band would inevitably encounter an unrelated collection of mortals in the dark of the woods. "They" would be speaking strange words and would represent competition for scarce resources. They might (who could know?) be capable of anything. Perhaps we are genetically programmed to be suspicious of all who are "not like us," predisposed to expect the worst from "them," and unconsciously biased towards creating governmental structures that recognize the fear of what "they" may do. More rationally, those that have had it within their power to structure governments may have been aware of the fact that "they" may need protection from "us" as well.

Perhaps it is time to update the famous observation of that legendary Speaker of the House, [Tip O'Neil](#), and conclude that all politics are tribal as well as local. Sad to say, much as we may continue to pay lip service to the high minded concept of "one citizen, one vote," lip service it will doubtless remain till that distant day when at last we regard all of our fellow citizens to be members of the same, great and democratic tribe.



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