

Cost is no mark of quality

Joan Chittister | Oct. 7, 2008 From Where I Stand

This is, they tell us over and over again, "The most important presidential election in our lifetime." And they may well be right. After all, we are fighting two wars and facing the biggest economic meltdown since the Great Depression of 1929. If that weren't enough, we have major social issues -- health, education, job creation, energy -- to deal with on the side. Not to mention an obligation to be a good citizen of the planet, as well.

We might be tempted to think, in the light of such agendas, that we need to hear from as many voices on every major subject as we can before we choose to commit ourselves to any of them. The decisions we make now might well mark this country for decades to come. So, spending a little more time on them in the course of a national election might be a good idea. After all, we spend millions of dollars and months of time on the process. You'd think we'd want as broad a discussion as we could get.

There are, after all, a diversity of political opinions -- as diverse as the country itself.

According to one presidential candidate, for instance, "The trade between the United States and Cuba should be the same as it is between the United States and China."

According to another, the death penalty should be replaced with life imprisonment and the country should require DNA testing prior to any federal executions.

One of them completely rejects the very idea of a missile defense shield.

Two of them have no position at all on the outsourcing of U.S. jobs.

One says quite clearly: "I oppose any law requiring registration of, or restricting the ownership, manufacture, or transfer or sale of firearms or ammunition to law-abiding citizens."

Most of those ideas differ a bit from the standard stump speech of the major campaigns. In fact, they represent different political philosophies entirely.

The argument for raising the blockade against Cuba, for instance, comes from Ralph Nader, an Independent Party candidate. Independents argue that international division is a strategy used by Republicans to control of people and maintain political power. We never debate Cuba at all anymore, however. We simply maintain the embargo. But neutral people may want to hear a discussion of how we ourselves can continue to use Guantanamo to hold and torture people illegally and call the Cubans a threat?

The argument for eliminating the death penalty comes from Cynthia McKinney of the Green Party in an era when more death penalty convictions are doubtful than sure and DNA tests exist that could conceivably correct many of them. Nevertheless, only the United States and 19 other nations of the world -- among them Afghanistan, China, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Yemen -- continue to adhere to the practice of capital punishment while we watch the national crime rates rise despite it.

The argument against building a missile defense shield in former Soviet states comes from Chuck Baldwin of the Constitution Party. He says we have no clear data that proves such weapons are necessary to the defense of the country -- no small question in a time of economic chaos.

The complete rejection of gun control legislation -- a subject always present in a presidential election but seldom fully debated or polled or submitted to public referendum -- comes from Bob Barr of the Libertarian Party.

And Barack Obama of the Democratic Party is neither clearly pro or con on the issue of whether or not the outsourcing of jobs to other countries is good for the United States. John McCain, Republican, on the other hand, sees outsourcing of U.S. jobs as economically desirable. How these distinctly different positions will affect the U.S. economy at a time of great economic uncertainty is both unclear and unstated.

While all these issues and multiple others fester in the heart of the society, (see 2008election.procon.org [1]) few are raised to the level of public consciousness, let alone debate, because the third party candidates who espouse them seldom get the attention it takes to raise them. They get little or no newspaper coverage, almost no television interviews, limited public engagements -- even in the university system -- and pathetically little in the public funding it takes to mount billboards, buy posters, hire staff, open election campaign headquarters and purchase TV time. And they never get to participate in publicly funded debates.

There are Internet sites available, of course. That's where I found these materials, for instance. But starting to count from myself on, I couldn't help but wonder how many of those sites are being read every day while the TV attack ads of the big spenders play quietly in the background?

Tell me again: Anyone can be president in the United States of America? Really? Well, if this election is any indicator, the truth is "not unless s/he can raise at least \$300 million." But if the presidency is up for the highest bidder, what kind of presidency or plutocracy will we have in years to come?

These other candidates fulfill all the requirements required of a presidential candidacy. They even get their names on the ballot but they get little or none of the public money it takes to bring other serious issues to serious attention. Then the very quality of the election process itself begins to erode.

From where I stand, it looks as if we miss a lot of ideas because people can't afford to raise them. But as more and more situations in this country -- war, crime, finances, international relations and social infrastructure -- change the character of this country, the question becomes less can they afford to raise them as it is can we afford to go on missing them?

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[1] <http://2008election.procon.org>