

Electoral Reform

by Lindy Davies

Henry George believed that no revolution was necessary to bring about the First Great Reform he advocated; that the essential structures were already in place in modern society and existing laws need only be modified to secure private and public property on a moral basis. Perhaps in earnest of this (although the reason he cited for his first race was “to raise hell”), George accepted twice the challenge to run for Mayor of New York City. In 1886, George said he would run only if the United Labor Parties gathered 30,000 signatures requesting it — which they did. During George’s life and the two decades following, the single tax movement was organized politically in the US and fielded many candidates. Notable single taxers in public office included Henry George, Jr., elected to the US Congress, Tom L. Johnson, Mayor of Cleveland, and Louis F. Post, Assistant Secretary of Labor in the administration of Woodrow Wilson.

George was not naïve, however, about the corruption of the political system. In *Social Problems*, he states that “It behooves us to look facts in the face. The experiment of popular government in the United States is clearly a failure.... our government by the people has become... government by the strong and unscrupulous.”

Georgists realized that to achieve their great goals, it would be necessary not only to educate the people, but to ensure that the political system would faithfully carry out the people’s wishes. Many got involved campaigns for electoral reform. One notable example was a successful effort in Oregon, spearheaded by single taxers, to initiate popular legislation by referendum. Many states have since adopted this reform. (Results have been mixed, however — as exemplified by California’s notorious Proposition 13.)

There is a growing consensus that the US political system must be reformed. Voter turnout has been consistently dropping and polls show increasing anger and cynicism toward elected officials, particularly in the Congress. The two major parties offer less and less choice; they are widely perceived as differing mainly in their rhetorical stances. “Winner-take-all” campaigns between major-party candidates often use the ugly but effective technique of “mudslinging” rather than offering positive proposals. Many calls have been made for a reform of campaign finance. Campaign contributions by individuals have been limited by law since the 80s. However, a huge loophole was left open — individuals and corporations can legally give unlimited amounts to political parties (who then turn around and spend it on enormously expensive TV-intensive modern campaigns). Legislation to disallow this kind of “soft money”, overwhelmingly supported by

the public, have left loopholes big enough to render them ineffective.

Another poorly-understood process in US government that preserves the status quo is the use of redistricting to give a nearly irresistible demographic advantage to incumbents in Congressional and Senate races. Because this process is controlled by the very politicians who stand to benefit from it, there is a huge incentive to “gerrymander” districts. (The tactic of “gerrymandering” — re-drawing districts to weaken opposition blocs — has long been controversial. After the Civil War it was used to weaken support for African-American legislators. More recently an “affirmative-action” form of gerrymandering was used to redress racial and ethnic imbalances.)

There is growing advocacy of a shift to a “proportional representation” system. Under such a system, voters rank the candidates, and legislators are elected according to a tally of their preference levels with voters. Under such a system, alternative political parties have a much better chance of influencing the legislative process. Voters no longer feel the need to “throw away” their votes on the lesser of two evils. Many nations use such a system today, including Germany, Japan, Australia and Brazil.



Voters queue in South Africa

Some advocate using the new technological possibilities of instant communication to institute “direct democracy” — in other words, to bypass the representative system and, essentially, decide every legislative question by electronic referendum. Others point out, though, that well-financed modern advertisers can sway popular opinion virtually instantly. In an age of instant communication, when most of the content of that communication is in the control of huge media conglomerates, a fair and uncorrupt system of “direct electronic democracy” is hard to imagine.

Henry George believed that “democratic government in more than name can exist only where wealth is distributed with something like equality — where the great mass of citizens are personally free and independent, neither fettered by their poverty nor made subject by their wealth.” And yet he proposed to use that very democratic system to bring about the reform that would create such a state of society. This could, perhaps, be called a paradox — or, a dual challenge to George’s followers. **GJ**

(Adapted from the readings for the Institute’s course in Applied Economics.)