

A dysfunctional democracy

THE ELECTION OF Barack Obama was a historic moment for America. Faced with a choice between two very different candidates at a perilous time in the nation's history, voters turned out in record numbers across the country and in Massachusetts to elect an African-American as president of the United States. It was a shining example of democracy in action.

But what happened at the local level here in Massachusetts is less inspiring. Voters went to the polls and had virtually no choices to make in any of the state and congressional races. Massachusetts, in fact, had the lowest percentage of contested legislative seats in the country. It was a shining example of a dysfunctional democracy.

As Alison Lobron writes in our cover article on the de facto one-party state, "Without elections, we're not a democracy. But without candidates, we're not much of a democracy either."

The apathetic response to the election was discouraging. After then-Sen. Dianne Wilkerson and Boston City Councilor Chuck Turner were indicted on bribery charges, Gov. Deval Patrick rushed to create a task force on ethics reform. But after the election debacle in November, no one on Beacon Hill rushed to create a task force to revive democracy in Massachusetts.

There has been a lot of talk about bribery statutes, ethics laws, influence peddling, and campaign finance regulations, but nothing about the corrupting atmosphere created when one party dominates politics the way Democrats dominate on Beacon Hill.

That domination is increasing. Republicans lost three more seats in the House, bringing their total representation on Beacon Hill to its lowest level in history. The five-member Republican caucus in the Senate can carpool to work together in a subcompact.

Like the Texans at the Alamo, Bay State Republicans still think they can battle back against overwhelming odds. Senate Minority Leader Richard Tisei told Lobron he thinks the party needs to re-embrace a message of social libertarianism and fiscal conservatism. James Peyser wrote in

The Boston Globe that the state GOP needs a complete makeover, including possibly a name change. Former Gov. Jane Swift, in an article in this issue of *CommonWealth*, says the party needs to aggressively pursue women, minorities, and young people.

The proposals all have merit, but they ignore the fact that the Massachusetts Republican Party is dangerously close to going extinct. The GOP is so down-and-out in Massachusetts that it may never recover unless the political playing field is leveled.

Lobron looked for answers in Minnesota, a state where every legislative seat was contested this past year and political competition—and political change—is a fact of life. Minnesota voters told her they couldn't imagine an election without opposing candidates. One Republican who was running for office in heavily Democratic Minneapolis went so far as to say uncontested elections are "un-American."

Minnesota has taken a number of steps to make it easier for candidates to run for office and to win. The Legislature there meets no more than 120 days over the course of a two-year session, which means being a lawmaker is a part-time job that doesn't take over your life the way it does here in Massachusetts—or attract those who see the position as a lifelong career.

Running for office is also affordable. There is a widely accepted \$35,000 spending cap on races for the Minnesota House, as well as some public financing. Neither exists in Massachusetts.

Finally, Minnesota prohibits candidates from building enormous campaign war chests. A candidate can carry over from one election cycle to the next only \$12,000. In Massachusetts there's no carry-over limit, and bulging campaign accounts have become a way to intimidate would-be challengers.

There's no simple answer for reviving political competition in Massachusetts, but it's absolutely necessary. As Democrat Warren Tolman says in his companion piece to Swift's essay, "Competition would be good for Democrats, and it would be good for our government."



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