

June 8

Bancroft: Our democracy could use a little help on the tough issues

Problems like the budget deficit and entitlement reform call for more intense public involvement.

By RON BANCROFT

Today is voting day in Maine. Many of you will have already gone to polls, as I plan to do this morning.

PPH Opinion

The Town Hall in Cumberland has a real community feel in those first few hours it is open. Usually our representative, Meredith Burgess, is near the door offering greetings but being very careful not to influence voters. Other volunteers are manning the voting stations or collecting signatures for one or more citizen initiatives. The sense is democracy at work -- a good feeling.

So if you haven't already been to your polling place, please drop by and do your part for democracy.

Hopefully you go with some sense of the candidates and issues on the ballot. The biggest stakes this year involve the wide-open gubernatorial primary and the statewide referendum questions. There has been good coverage of the candidates and the ballot questions in the Press Herald and on MPBN television. If you need a quick check on candidates or issues go to www.pressherald.com, and scroll toward the bottom of the page to the special section on the 2010 governor's race. The Sunday Telegram also had an excellent special section on the election.

Many of us do not take the time to be fully informed. We often depend on the views of a friend (hopefully knowledgeable) or simply fall back on party affiliation.

In spite of this tendency, our democracy seems to work -- or does it?

Just two weeks ago a statewide poll suggested that 42 percent of Mainers could not name even one of the four Democrats or seven Republican candidates for governor in the primaries.

At a time when our state faces significant challenges on economic, education, and health care fronts, this seems an unfortunate situation.

What could improve our democracy? Probably not the remedy suggested by economist Bryan Caplan in his recent book "The Myth of the Rational Voter" -- an issues awareness test for all citizens. Those who pass the test get two votes.

While this approach has a certain appeal to us civics majors, I am sure it would not pass muster with the American Civil Liberties Union, among others.

More promising to me is an approach termed "deliberative democracy" whose leading practitioner is James Fishkin of Stanford University.

Fishkin's approach is to poll a large sample of people on a particular issue. A smaller subset of the polled group is given briefing materials on the issue. Moderators then lead small group discussions of the issue, where questions

are developed for responses from "experts." After all this discussion and further study, the sub-group, now presumably much better informed, is polled again. The results of this approach have been quite significant and heartening.

For example, a Michigan discussion raised support for a higher income tax to address the state's economic situation from 27 percent to 45 percent. At the same time, support for decreasing corporate taxes went from 40 percent to 67 percent.

Apparently having a disciplined group approach to better understanding of an issue builds more support for solutions that are much-needed but often unpopular.

This kind of approach is timely, given the difficult choices we face as a country regarding our growing budget deficit.

Over the next 10 to 20 years we are likely to be facing a Greece-like crisis, but on a much larger and potentially more catastrophic scale.

What is needed to put our long term financial house in order is well known by those who have studied this problem.

A long-term solution would likely involve increasing the age of Social Security eligibility, increasing means-testing for Medicare, changing the way we pay for medical services and raising taxes.

Yet there is absolutely no political support from either party to take this essential medicine. Moreover, most politicians view even mentioning such measures as a kiss of death politically.

There is a ray of hope on this front. The newly created National Commission on Deficit Reduction has adopted a form of deliberative democracy to help inform its process.

The group "America Speaks" will facilitate a series of citizen forums across the country this summer to try to build consensus for a long-term solution.

In fact, one is scheduled for the Augusta Civic Center for June 26. If you are interested in joining, you can register at usabudgetdiscussion.org.

As we look beyond Election Day 2010, it is clear that maintaining our democracy will take more than simply going to the polls. Get involved. Be part of the informed and part of the solution.

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