

Opinion

Picking candidates by the numbers - Editorials & Commentary - International Herald Tribune

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ATHENS — Athenian democracy

All over the world, political parties face the problem of how to nominate candidates democratically. Democracy is less credible if the choices on the electoral ballot are not determined by truly democratic means.

The main mechanism of democratizing nominations, the mass primary, has a long and distinguished history. The primary has the advantage of mass participation, but it also has some limitations. Turnout is often low and unrepresentative.

Citizens who do participate do not always have the time or motivation to become properly informed about candidates' positions or topical issues. People often vote on the basis of name recognition and a superficial impression of sound bites broadcast through the news media.

So what is the alternative? In most countries, parties that do not use the mass primary usually leave the nomination of candidates to party elites. Democratic reformers face an unsatisfactory choice between primaries and elites - between politically equal but relatively uninformed masses, or better-informed but unequal party players.

Is there a way out of this dilemma? Is there a way to include an informed and representative public voice in the nomination process? A solution can be found in the practices of ancient Athens, where hundreds of citizens chosen by lot would regularly deliberate together and make important public decisions.

In ancient Athens, there were citizens' juries and legislative commissions of several hundreds, as well as the Council of 500 that set the agenda for the Agora, the public forum - all chosen by lot. Lottery provided for an equal chance to participate, while deliberation ensured an informed outcome.

On Sunday, Pasok, the socialist party of Greece, revived this ancient practice after 2,400 years and applied it to the selection of candidates in the municipal elections.

In the Athenian district of Marousi, site of the Athens Olympics, a randomly selected group of 160 citizens gathered to choose from among six candidates. All members of the group were sent briefing materials on 19 issues ranging from traffic and waste disposal to private universities and social services. After 10 hours of deliberation and direct questioning of the candidates, the participants voted by secret ballot; in the second round, Panos Alexandris won a clear majority and was therefore nominated as the Pasok candidate for mayor of Marousi.

This was the first time deliberative polling - a method developed by the Center of Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University - has been used anywhere in the world to select candidates for election. The concept and process was developed and managed by an international group of international experts, allowing academic and political experience to converge for the public good.

This experiment is a way of enhancing democracy at the party and national level. Deliberative polls will be integrated into other party activities also, as part of our efforts to create a more open party that reflects a more open, politically engaged society.

In Athens, where democracy was first developed, we have been drawing on the lessons of our forefathers to give greater legitimacy to modern-day democracy. Unless our politicians are accountable to their electorates, unless our citizens have

equal access to accurate and balanced information, unless we take measures to improve public participation in decision-making processes, our democracies will always fall short.

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