

# The hard labor of democracy

Filing for political office is nearly over, which means campaigns leading up to the November election soon will start in earnest. Besides erecting obnoxious signs along every roadway in the valley, candidates for local, state and federal offices are thinking about what they stand for, and, on a different level, what they will actually tell voters they stand for over the next six months.

A few candidates have strong opinions, clearly reflecting a worldview ranging from libertarian to liberal. These candidates tend to be treated as fringe candidates with little chance of winning. Some candidates are more pragmatic, but have enough conviction to represent a viewpoint distinctly to the left or right of center. These candidates occasionally win and often have long, distinguished political careers. But they aren't the preferred vessels of the powers that be.

The majority of candidates don't have any strong convictions whatsoever. They get involved in politics for purely cynical or opportunistic reasons, hoping an elective position will help them get rich, powerful or at least an invitation to join an exclusive club. Or, maybe they simply simply put up to it by their employer or industry. These candidates see politics not as public service but as a means to a personal or business end. The county commissioners caught up in the Operation G-Sting corruption probe fall squarely into this category.

Candidates with any chance of winning in November need to raise money and conduct professional campaigns. This means hiring a seasoned campaign manager or public relations firm. This individual or firm knows the formula for getting elected, and this formula has little to do with listening to voters' concerns and expressing informed, intelligent opinions. The formula is designed to punch the voters' buttons without taking any chances.

The most common stance is that the candidate is "tough on crime." This is a purposely meaningless position, yet it is difficult to disagree with in a general sense. The fact that those elected officials who have enacted "tough on crime" laws have done great harm to the criminal justice system and to taxpayers is too nuanced a position to try out on distracted voters.

Another common campaign plank is to "support education." Again, this is meaningless and impossible to argue with. Who isn't for education? A more interesting position paper might break down the strengths and weaknesses of the public education system and propose funding changes and reforms. That, however, is a lot to ask of a candidate for local or state office who, before filing, probably hadn't given the issue much thought.

If a candidate does, by chance, get more specific in regard to education, suggesting this or that way to improve things, the matter of how to fund it is never addressed. Candidates and their campaign handlers would never, for example, advocate a funding increase, even if it's obvious that more revenue would be needed

to establish a program they support.

Candidates for local office frequently say they want to "address traffic congestion" and "improve air quality." Surely these are worthwhile goals for any political leader, but more often than not the candidates have done no more research on these topics than the average voter. Whether they possess any particular knowledge that makes them better candidates than their opponents is hard to determine.

This is a lamentable situation, one that produces a number of less-than-inspiring political representatives. But it isn't really the candidates' fault. Much of the blame should be placed on the voters, most of whom demand little of candidates. Most voters don't attend political events to hear issues discussed. They don't call the candidates and ask them questions. They don't watch political debates to compare and contrast the candidates. They ignore the fliers the candidates mail out, scrambling at the last minute to fill out a half-way intelligent sample ballot.

Some of the blame also should go to the news media, which do a lackluster job of covering local political campaigns. The TV stations all but ignore the candidates until election night, when the talking heads struggle to correctly pronounce the names of winners and losers they've never heard of. The daily newspapers are marginally better, heavily covering the major races, but giving barebones attention to the lower-level campaigns. The most diligent newspaper reader still struggles mightily to get a decent idea of the substantive differences between, say, state Assembly or judge candidates.

There is no easy solution. Voters and journalists alike must place democracy, that quaint old notion, higher on their priority lists. If citizens took voting for politicians as seriously as they do voting for "American Idol" contestants, America would be a better place. Millions across America don't bother to participate in a process that billions around the globe only dream about.

Meanwhile, the news media are so obsessed with ratings and readership surveys that they sometimes lose sight of their constitutional role as political watchdogs. Collectively, the news media do a decent job of probing the presidential candidates, though they remain too obsessed with the horse race mentality created by almost dailing poll results. At the local level, interviewing candidates and researching their records is hard labor—harder than writing a concert review or a feature story on trends in lawn ornamentation, for sure. But it is the essence of good journalism and the fundamental role the media play in a thriving democracy.

Over the next six months, voters and news reporters should press the candidates to go beyond the shallow rhetoric of their campaign fliers and explain who they are and where they stand on the vital issues of the day. The quality of our political representation depends on it.