

Too Many Politicians Please Party Leaders, Not Constituents

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Posted: Tuesday, June 16, 2009

Given a polity of democracy, one would think that American politicians would always be aiming to please the constituencies they represent. After all, those voters are the ones who determine whether a politician stays in or is removed from office.

That's the way it's supposed to work.

But it turns out that it isn't working that way at all. At least not in some states.

I don't know enough about what's happening in every state, so I'm not prepared to make a comprehensive claim. But in the states I follow regularly, it's pretty clear that politicians are not aiming to please those who elect them.

And if that's the case, we've got a fundamental problem with our democracy itself.

My own state, Illinois, is a prime example. Even though proudly proclaiming itself as the Land of Lincoln and more recently as the Home of Obama, Illinois has had a problem with living up to the minimal standards of democracy for a long time now. Three of our governors over the last 35 years have done prison time (although one of them, Dan Walker, not for offenses while in office) and our most recent ex-governor, Rod Blagojevich, is facing charges that, if proven, will send him to jail, too.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Undemocratic practices here have been rife at all levels and functions of government for a long time with the absence of significant regulations making influence-peddling and pay-to-play politics the de facto rules of the Illinois political game for decades. The cynic in me recognizes that the Blagojevich scandals were only typical state politics on steroids.

Nonetheless, those scandals, making Illinois the political laughingstock of the nation, provided the state an exceptional opportunity to reform government according to democratic principles.

The lieutenant governor who replaced Blagojevich appointed a blue ribbon commission to recommend the political reforms that were needed. When it came to crunch time – that is, when the votes in the General Assembly were to be tallied – a lot of legislators took a pass on instituting political and economic reformations.

These legislators were not aiming to please their constituents. They were, instead, aiming to please their party leaders, from whom they receive benefits, rewards and campaign funds – the party leaders who have everything to gain by keeping things just as they are.

"Aiming to please" is a phrase the Apostle Paul uses in one of his many letters to the Christian community in Corinth.

Paul's problem appears to be significantly different than the one facing Illinois legislators, at least on the surface. In the fifth chapter of 2 Corinthians, we find Paul trying to work out the relationship between our physical, earthly bodies, which are finite and fragile, and that part of ourselves that has the promise of being eternal and enduring.

Paul knows that it is through what we do with and in our earthly life that we give witness to ourselves and to others that there is, as he puts it, "a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" for us. He writes that in both the physical and spiritual dimensions of our lives, the criterion is always the same: "we make it our aim to please Christ." (2 Corinthians 5:9)

Paul proceeds to tell the Corinthians that Christ's own mission from God was to achieve a reconciliation between God and humanity through his own earthly and physical self-giving, and that this ministry of reconciliation has now been entrusted to Christ's followers, which requires them as well to no longer live for themselves but for the reconciling cause of Christ.

Paul understood what was at stake in living the Christian life: We give up living only for ourselves physically and spiritually in response to a self-giving God revealed to us in a self-giving Christ so that others too might experience the fullness of God's gifts of both our finite physical life and our infinite spiritual life.

State governors and legislators shouldn't, obviously, get into the business of reconciling humans with the divine. That, in a democratic society, is outside their mandate and assigned to others.

But within a democratic polity, those governors and legislators do have an obligation of aiming to please not themselves or their political benefactors but those they represent through the adoption and implementation of policies that justly serve the needs of all.

The Christian citizen has a mandate, too. It is not, according to Paul, to restrict one's attention only to the spiritual and eternal well-being of others, as important as that is. Instead, the obligation – grounded in God's eternal purpose for our lives – is to do everything within our God-given power to be sure the earthly needs of our sisters and brothers are met, as we know God intends.

Unavoidably then, our Christian faith leads us to generous acts of earthly charity toward those in need as well as to political action that will also serve whomever is vulnerable among us and that will promote the earthly good for all, which has its source in God.

It's what's at stake, according to Paul, in aiming to please Christ.