

Vote Twice, at Least

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Our county has such immense power, influence, and control over the lives of other nations and peoples that it would be unjust and irresponsible for individual Americans to vote only on their own self-identity and self interest within a national context.

I'm deducing here from other statements by Madison, but I suspect he thought religion and ethics might intensify rather than relieve those consequences, despite their teachings to the contrary. They would be used, that is, to rationalize whatever individuals or groups believed would be in their self-interest.

Rather than appeal to moral and religious motives, therefore, Madison found his solution to the deep problem of human sin in a particular political structure.

It certainly wasn't simple or pure democracy that he advocated in his Federalist Paper Number 10, since a majority of those voting could override the rights and aims of the minority, leading to "spectacles of turbulence and contention." But neither was the problem solved by destroying liberty through the rule of one or a few.

His structural solution was a democratic republic, by which he meant the election of citizen leaders to represent sufficiently large portions of the population so that a diversity of self-interests and factions would be honored in reaching political decisions for the whole.

It was a stroke of genius, along with the other constitutional provisions of limited government based on checks and balances among functions, dual sovereignty between the federal government and the states, and a set of rights that applied to all individuals, irrespective of whether they were in any majority or any minority.

There didn't need to be an authorized religion or ethical theory or an approved list of them to make republican democracy work. But there did need to be respect for the religious and ethical stances individuals bring with them as they participated in the political process, based on the principle of one person, one vote.

One week from today, U.S. citizens across the nation—one by one—will again participate in the political structure Madison and his colleagues created in 1787.

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But can this Madisonian solution still work today? Can each one of us exercise the franchise

based on the combination of our self-interest and whatever weight we give to our religious and ethical convictions, confident that some sort of justice and unity can be achieved through the structures and provisions of our Constitution?

I don't think so. I think, instead, that each one of us has to vote at least twice—and maybe more than that.

Don't jump to the conclusion that this is just another Chicagoan trying to justify what has been our tradition here in the city of allowing some people to have their vote count more than once. That's not what I'm arguing for.

I mean, rather, that in the contemporary world our county has such immense power, influence, and control over the lives of other nations and peoples that it would be unjust and irresponsible for individual Americans to vote only on their own self-identity and self interest within a national context.

Whether it be in the realms of economics, health, food, the environment, war and peace, human rights, and so many other areas, our election decisions will have a profound and lasting impact on the lives of people around the world.

So when we cast our ballots on Nov. 4, we've got to find a way to account for the self-identity and self-interest of those outside the United States.

We've got to vote for them as well as ourselves.

For disciples of Jesus there is guidance on how to accomplish this. When, in the Gospel of Matthew, a lawyer asks Jesus, as a test, which of all the commandments is the greatest, Jesus says it is the one about loving God with every dimension of one's self and loving the other—the neighbor—as one loves one's own self.

That's the commandment. That's the operating principle. It is up to us to make it operational in the concrete conditions of our contemporary world, in this case, the forthcoming election.

Madison may still be right: that like all religious and ethical teachings, the Christian ones will end up being only a rationalization of our own self-interest.

But it's the best we've got, and better, I believe, than voting with no concern at all about the consequences of the election for people around the world, especially those who have the least power to act on their own self-interest in relation to the power of others.

So in this election, love God completely, and love the neighbor as you love yourself.

And vote twice, at the very least.