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I voted, but....

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BLUE GRASS, Va.—I drew an “X” on three paper ballots in the old Blue Grass School on Tuesday. I fulfilled my minimal obligation as a citizen. Two of my three choices won; I was not pleased.

Highland County sold this school more than three decades ago to the Blue Grass Ruritan Club, a community-service organization, owing to declining enrollment. Our County’s K-12 system now has only about 200 students. Enrollment is projected to decline, continuing a long-term trend.

Unpalatable choices are ahead, both locally and nationally.

As I “xed” my ballots, I felt unhappy voting for the least objectionable candidate for President, Senator and Congressman.

For that reason, I conference-called Mr. super-duper GOP strategist and Mr. super-duper Democrat strategist on Wednesday for a not-for-attribution conversation to tell me why I felt so bad about backing a winner.

Me: Welcome. We’ve known each other a long time, so I expect the straight skinny. Why is an election that’s so important feel so small? Why weren’t the candidates forced to answer hard questions?

DEM: For one thing, the “debates” we present to the people aren’t debates. The candidates never go back and forth with questions to each other. They’re rarely forced to face their inconsistencies, falsehoods and contradictions.

GOP: The veteran media personalities who moderate these “debates” have become institutionalized in Washington politics. They’re an enabling class of inmates in the same asylum. All you get from them are soft questions that elicit well-rehearsed answers which obfuscate and mislead. We need a new format, and we need to get rid of the toothless tabbies of the talk-show set.

Put the two candidates in a pit with each other for two hours five or six times. No moderator. One presents his position; the other cross examines. Then, they reverse roles. Issue after issue.

DEM: Campaigning is mostly about choosing words and phrases that lead voters to fill them in with whatever they want to believe they mean. “Protect the middle class.”—that can mean anything and everything, and both candidates promised it.

GOP: The rhetoric tempts us with its largeness and generality. Hope and change. Forward. Morning in America. These words appeal to our emotional needs. They sweep us up. They fake us out.

DEM: The process protects candidates from having to defend specific proposals. Romney was never forced to answer which tax breaks he would cut and by how much. Obama was never asked to propose a plan to reduce the deficit. Neither was expected to reveal how he would avoid the fiscal cliff of tax hikes and spending cuts scheduled for January 1st. They duck and hide, and the process lets them get away with it. They like the process as is.

GOP: The specifics you get from them are too small to solve anything big and are never connected to the larger picture. What are all the costs of a proposed change? When Romney, as Governor, was forced to think through what do you do to cover those without health insurance, he came up with Obamacare at the state level. In 2012 campaign, he came up with emergency rooms, the costs of which are mainly borne by everyone with health insurance. Socialize the problem; privatize the cost but keep it obscure. A runt of an answer if you ask me.

DEM: Obama kept pitching: “Tax the wealthy a little bit more.” He knows that the budget will not be balanced or the deficit erased if those making \$250,000 are taxed at the pre-Bush rates. That’s not a solution, but it appeals to people who have less. We are served nothing but meringue, and we eat it rubbing our political tummies and saying, “Yum, Yum.”

GOP: Politicians have no answers to big, hard questions. If they had big, hard answers, they wouldn’t be politicians.

DEM: At best, they have partial answers. I think many constituents know this, down deep. That’s why a lot of supporters of every incumbent are disenchanted at the end of each four-year term.

GOP: A few of us tried to get Romney to run on hard choices, but he chose to do what Obama did in 2008, promise everything to as many of his possible constituencies as possible. No-pain-all-gain Mitt.

Dem: A few of *us* tried to get Obama to run on hard choices, but he said he couldn’t beat Romney by promising austerity to people already hurting. Nobody will vote austerity on themselves unless catastrophe is the only alternative. That’s why you never heard Obama present a deficit-reduction plan, or a get-the-budget-under-control plan or let’s-think-about-an-affordable-entitlements plan.

GOP: Same here. No jobs plan, except trust me because I ran a financial chop shop 13 years back whose purpose was making money not creating jobs. Romney’s business experience at Bain had zero relevance to

being President of a government with a divided bicameral legislature and a Supreme Court. His defense budget amounted to more dollars without defined purpose. But what do you expect from a candidate who had not one minute of experience in either foreign policy or military affairs? He had to blow big and tough, because that sounds good behind a flag-draped podium.

GOP: One problem is that a government more or less equally divided between ideological opposites tends to stay more or less equally divided. Neither side can push through much of its agenda, but both can block most of the other side's. Meanwhile, the problems get bigger, more complex, more costly and more intractable. Politicians in this situation prefer stalemate to change. Things are addressed a bit only when we face disaster.

Dem: We used to have a system that worked because its political foundation was built on a big, fat mushy middle. But both Parties have drifted toward their harder edges where ideological primaries and inflexibility reign. A system with a big, fat mushy middle functions. A dumbbell-shaped system with a thin middle stalls out and keeps kicking problems down the road.

DEM: Maybe governments in democracies are bound to perform poorly in their old age, because they are set up to allow too many hands to squeeze too much out of them. The rich get breaks and assistance that help keep them well off. The poor get services to keep them from begging on the streets. The middle class gets a little of both.

GOP: Everyone wants a lot of something for nothing. There's always a line in front of the government's here's-something window, whether it's the deserving poor, the deserving middle-class or the deserving rich.

DEM: Democracy rewards everyone until the bill for the frolic comes due. Then we'll see who pays the most and for how long.

GOP: Oh, I'm sure we won't go over the fiscal cliff. We'll tease out a partial solution that will muddle us through for another couple of years. Compromise is always a partial solution.

DEM: ...and usually inadequate. So we'll get patched up in the emergency room.

GOP: A Romney one-size-fits-all solution, I should point out.

DEM: Dictators are worse.

GOP: Agreed.

Me: So what's the bottom line?

DEM: Vote—for my guy. We're the party of the little people.

GOP: No, vote for mine. We're the party of the bigger little people.

Me: I can't wait. Maybe my County will provide sharper voting pencils in four years.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of **How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property**, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books -- **Snowy Mountain Breakdown, Land Matters** and **Blue Grass Notes** -- are available through his website.

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