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Where are John and Jane Q. Public?

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From: Madison Capital Times

Date: 3/12/2001

In doing this Sustaining Wisconsin project there's an important background question: do you, the concerned public to which it's directed, actually exist? I and others at COWS still think you do, but there's accumulating contrary evidence. Let's look at some of the most recent, and deal up front with the more troubling background.

The Presidential election just past briefly focused attention on the mechanics of one way of assuming power in the greatest military and economic power on earth stealing it. For someone like myself born into the Promise Years of the '50s, educated on race and sex in the '60s, and trying to make sense of the adult life spent ever since this was a genuinely shocking event. Review the cultural markers. You've got the Gettysburg Address memorized in grade school, The Battle of Algiers and some other movies about French colonialism, and then, many years later, with much higher production values, Murdoch's FOX and Turner's CSPAN recording a slow motion coup in your very own country. A governor gets his brother (also, interestingly, a governor) to disqualify the votes of about sixty thousand law-abiding people in his state as felons, and the U.S. Supreme Court, for the first time in our nation's history, uses the "checking" power of one branch of government to appoint another. Done deal, and mostly blackslapping grins in result. Who now wants even to try to remember a stocky guy named called Al Gore?

But if the millennial coup is done and gone, the bigger voting picture is the one displayed here: what the distinguished political science professor Walter Dean Burnham once simply called "the appearance and disappearance of the American voter."

The basic story is that, if voting participation is a pretty good measure of how democratic a country is, the United States was once the most democratic nation on earth, and is now about the least. Well before the social revolutions that overthrew the aristocracies of other capitalisms, we in America got the vote. In fact we got it before we were "workers" in the sense of being in a free labor contract with employers. Most of us were still self-employed as farmers, or other scattered yeoman (and their wives). But we white and male, surely, but still without substantial property, and so qualifying on some PC grade of democratic accomplishment grabbed it from those who were simply rich, in what liberal historians later recorded as the "second American revolution." And then, in the beginning accomplishment of what Lincoln was talking about, black men got it (briefly). And then, finally, the ladies did as well, but only after the game began to play down, with the crushing of the Populists and the dawn of a "Progressive" moment that, outside Wisconsin and a few others places, wasn't particularly progressive at all.

Then, after an uptick in the voting numbers with the New Deal, on through the Promise Years, and it's downhill all the way. At present, about half of Americans show up at Presidential elections, about a third at off-year Congressional ones, and really tiny percentages about a tenth of the electorate or less in the primaries that largely determine who finally wins. The remaining active electorate is also decisively class-skewed, with the better and more credentialed voting at rates vastly greater than the less.

To make this almost a joke, most of us don't even know the names, much less the convictions, of those who claim to represent us. Want an uncomfortable civics lesson? Try to name your state assembly person, county board rep, city council rep, not to mention all the administrative people they appoint counting all of them, believe it or not, about 200 people who claim to be in office based on "your" vote. I know I can't.

So where are John and Jane Doe public in all of this? Basically, when not asleep, they're working, shopping, or watching TV. With a few friends of course, but barely talking to their neighbors, who are the other people voting in their district. And with parents getting old! So a natural question occurs: how in the world could anyone ever count on them meaning, how could any of us ever count on us (where would we even find the time, much less the interest?) to insist that this country live up to its promise?

I think there's an answer, but first some more bad news next week.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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