

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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“SC campaigns: Nasty, dark, dirty, ugly, sleazy, bloody, vicious”

– Headline in *The State* newspaper, Columbia, South Carolina, January 11, 2012

“Republicans after South Carolina: An ugly, brutish, take-no-prisoners battle”

– Headline in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Seattle, Washington, January 21, 2012

The good news. We in the Tetons will be spared most of the Super PAC-fueled avalanche of awfulness that will hallmark the 2012 presidential elections.

The bad news. We'll be spared that avalanche of awfulness because, when it comes to presidential races, your vote doesn't matter. Nor does mine. Nor does that of anyone else in Wyoming. Nor, for that matter, does the vote of over 60 percent of America. Not one whit.

The reason is the Electoral College. Whatever their other qualities, America's Founding Fathers were afraid of direct democracy. Hence the original system for having US senators appointed by state legislatures. Hence the Electoral College, which gives utter lie to the idea that America is the pinnacle of democracy. Why? Because no matter what any one voter does this November, it's a foregone conclusion who will win the electoral votes of 32 states, representing 61 percent of all electoral votes. (Table 1)

As a result, the campaigns of both President Obama and his challenger will focus on the 19 states in play, and utterly ignore the rest of America. All 190 million of us.

Like the Fiddler on the Roof, the Electoral College's defenders can do little except cite tradition. The Constitution established the Electoral College; therefore it must be right. Just like slavery. Or denying the vote to men who did not own property. Or, for that matter, denying the vote to women.

If you truly believe in democracy, the argument for the Electoral College doesn't hold even a thimbleful of water. Yet there it is, an artifact which was dated long before the 2000 presidential race was won by the man who finished second.

Why mention this now? Because last Saturday's South Carolina primary greatly increases the chances that 2012 will be a repeat of 2000, with President Obama receiving a majority of the popular vote but losing the electoral vote. Which, of course, will only further erode America's claim to being the world's model of democracy.

While we're on the subject, let's look at three other nuggets that have emerged from this year's primaries.

Nugget 1: During January 3's caucus, Iowa's Republican party lost the votes in eight of the state's 1,774 precincts. Because these votes were never tallied, it will never be known who actually won the election.

Reaction: Stuff happens. As the head of the Iowa GOP pointed out, voting is a human process, and humans are fallible. Besides, eight precincts amount to only 0.4 percent of Iowa's total.

What amazes me, though, is that Iowa has a history of inaccurate vote counts, as do other states (see Florida: 2000: hanging chads). Yet rather than focus on improving voting systems to ensure that every vote cast is accurately counted, Republicans nationwide have focused on addressing the completely

manufactured issue of voter fraud. Why? Because, by reducing the number of potential Democratic voters, it increases their chances of holding onto power.

To put this issue in perspective, look at Iowa's almost-neighbor of Kansas. There, the Secretary of State is pushing a restrictive voter ID law. Why? Because, he claims, it's a major issue.

Only it's not. Between 2004 and 2009, exactly one case of voter fraud was prosecuted in Kansas. That's the numerator. The denominator of votes cast in all races during that time – federal, state, and local – was something north of 10 million.

Compare that to the very real 550 or so votes – out of a total of 121,583 – which were cast but not counted in Iowa two weeks ago, and you get the picture. Far better to address an actual problem than grandstand a bogus one, but right now, grandstanding seems about all our political system is capable of doing.

Why is this so? Item 2 starts to hint at it. In last Thursday's debate in South Carolina, Newt Gingrich stated: "I think grandiose thoughts. This is a grandiose country of big people doing big things and we need leadership prepared to take on big projects."

Reaction: Good thing you professed history, Professor Gingrich, and not English.

A quick internet search suggests "grandiose" is an 8th or 9th grade vocabulary word. Meaning most high school kids know that grandiose means "characterized by affectation of grandeur or splendor or by absurd exaggeration."

That former-Speaker Gingrich – the self-proclaimed intellect of the Republican presidential field – would use "grandiose" to describe himself and the nation suggests either a grandiosely large ego or a vocabulary that petered out in middle school. Neither is a quality one looks for in the leader of the free world. More importantly, the regular use of hyperbolic language – not just Speaker Gingrich's stock in trade, but a contagion he's spread throughout the political system – only distorts reality, making effective governing that much harder.

Nuggets 3a and b offer even more clues.

Nugget 3a: In the three primaries held to date, the Tea Party has fractured into those who feel the best way to beat Obama is to nominate the more pragmatic Romney, and those who want to support a more ideologically-pure candidate.

Nugget 3b: Despite receiving the endorsement of the nation's evangelicals a week before the South Carolina primary, in that contest, Rick Santorum came in a distant third.

Combined, 3a and 3b hint at the long-term problems created by embracing ideological purity in the pursuit of short-term political gain.

Since George H.W. Bush's defeat in 1992, the GOP has increasingly pandered to ideological extremes, both economic and moral. This process has greatly accelerated in the past few years, reaching a point where it's become difficult to win a Republican nomination without being pure as driven snow on a variety of issues ranging from taxes (always bad) to reproductive choice (ditto) to climate change (isn't happening).

This has created two problems for the GOP, both of which are becoming more pronounced at an increasingly rapid rate.

First, it pits hardcores against hardcores. Moralists. Libertarians. Neo-conservatives. Deficit hawks. Those favoring government helping business. All these factions and more have been wooed by the GOP, but the party's tent is no longer big enough nor flexible enough to fit them all. The net result? Fratricide, then more fratricide, as winning factions turn on themselves in their desire to achieve even greater levels of purity (see: Tea Party: South Carolina primary).

Second, even if factions within the party weren't committing fratricide, they're failing on the more fundamental level of delivering votes. The failure of the evangelical community to deliver for Santorum, and the failure of the broader Tea Party movement to unite behind any one candidate, suggest that, as has happened so often, a small movement's surge has been exploited by craven politicians and grossly over-estimated by the media. The water has found its level, and both factions have settled back into being fringe players.

On a much more serious level, though, this failure to deliver votes has paralyzed the House of Representatives, where intra-party strife within the ruling Republicans nearly shut the government down multiple times. Brinkmanship may be entertaining, but governance is about delivering votes.

Why is all this happening? Mostly because, while America is a basically-conservative place, "conservatism" has lost its meaning. In search of votes, over the past 20 years the GOP has been racing ever-harder to the right, distilling the meaning of conservatism to a point where the only way to win a Republican primary is by being even more ideologically pure than the next guy. And while such a phenomenon has its own internal political logic, as Professor Gingrich would no-doubt acknowledge, history shows that, long-term, quests for ideological purity almost always end badly (see: China: Mao: Cultural Revolution or the Soviet Union: Stalin: Purges).

Sadly, thanks to the Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision, things will likely get worse before they get better. As the example of Jackson Hole's own Foster Friess shows, anyone so inclined can now – with complete anonymity – spend any amount to support candidates they favor or attack those they oppose. And while this approach passed the Supreme Court's ideological purity test, its real world ramifications are producing a world the court neither envisioned nor desires. This is because the vast amounts of money will inevitably produce what we saw two years ago in the Congressional elections and what we're seeing today in the Republican primaries: increasingly ideological candidates. As this happens, our already-dysfunctional political system – today at the national level; tomorrow at state and local levels – will become even more so.

Worse still, as those undocumented riches increasingly slosh out of campaigns and into the legislative process, the governance system will increasingly be viewed as corrupt, leading to an equal-and-opposite backlash that will leave American democracy even further in tatters.

Thus the fruits of ideological purity. A triumph perhaps, but a Pyrrhic one at best.

**Table 1:
The Electoral College and the 2012 Presidential Election**

	Number	2011 Population (combined, in millions/ percent of total)	Electoral Votes (combined/ percent of total)	States
States Certain to be Won by Obama	13	101/ 32%	171/ 32%	California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, Washington, DC
States Certain to be Won by GOP Nominee	19	88/ 28%	155/ 28%	Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Wyoming
States in Play	19	122/ 39%	212/ 39%	Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin