

CHAPTER 23

A PERCEPTIVE VOTER

The Greek philosophers Gorgias and Protagoras are credited with being the first to use the strategy of rhetorically exploiting human emotion (pathos) in the battle for persuasion, particularly in political debates. Their tactics made them highly successful, wealthy and in demand, largely because their approach often worked.

Pathetic (lit. “arousing pity”) arguments by politicians have worked for millennia and still work today. Human emotions should play a role in forming our opinions or driving our actions on matters of substance. But the exploitation of volatile emotions to resolve issues with severe, practical and often predictable repercussions can backfire, leading to other, maybe worse, problems. At least, that was the conclusion reached by most of our political forefathers.

They presumed, perhaps naïvely, that each individual voter would inherently take their voting privilege and responsibilities to heart. They would naturally recognize that their choices may have enormous consequences for themselves, their livelihoods, their families, their communities and, quite possibly, their descendants. And, having recently endured much hardship for their newfound freedom, most voters of that day knew the adversity that could result from a flippant or naïve attitude toward the electoral process and their own participation in it. They understood well the significance of their votes and the unique privilege of that blessing.

Such “gravitas” has waned as those times and experiences have become distant. But our responsibility to study the issues, the parties and the candidates thoroughly and with a healthy skepticism remains a critical and necessary burden today.

Read the wisdom of those who gave us this privilege as they pondered the grim result of voters embracing naiveté or apathy.

DAY 326

JAMES MADISON

"Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

To W.T. Barry, 1822

Today Mr. Madison might write:

Knowledge will always rule over ignorance. So, any people that want to be their own bosses first have to equip themselves with the intellectual muscle of knowledge.

DAY 327

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

"A learned blockhead is a greater blockhead than an ignorant one. "

Published in Poor Richard's Almanack, 1744

Today Mr. Franklin might write:

An educated idiot makes a better idiot than an ignorant idiot.

DAY 328

EDMUND BURKE

"It is a general popular error to suppose the loudest complainers for the publick to be the most anxious for its welfare."

Observations on a Late Publication on the Present State of the [British] Nation, 1769

Today Mr. Burke might write:

Many people mistakenly assume that those so-called advocates for the people who scream the loudest must be the most caring champions of their well-being.

DAY 329

ALEXIS DE TOQUEVILLE

"The foremost, or indeed the sole condition which is required in order to succeed in centralizing the supreme power in a democratic community is to love equality, or to get men to believe you love it. Thus the science of despotism, which was once so complex, is simplified, and reduced as it were to a single principle."

Democracy in America, Vol 1, Chapter IV, 1835

Today M. de Toqueville might write:

The most important or, really, the only condition needed to centralize all power in a republic is to "love equality" or, rather, to persuade the people that you love it. That's how the science of tyranny, which once was so complicated, became simple; it was, basically, reduced to that one, single strategy.

DAY 330

SAMUEL ADAMS

"The public cannot be too curious concerning the character of public men."

To James Warren, 1775

Today Mr. Adams might write:

It's impossible for voters to ask too many questions about the moral character of their public servants.

DAY 331

JAMES MADISON

"If it be true that all governments rest on opinion it is no less true that the strength of opinion in each individual... depend much on the number which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion."

The Federalist, No. 49 (as "Publius"), February 2, 1788

Today Mr. Madison might write:

If it's true that all governments rely on public opinion, it's also true that everyone's passion for his own opinion... largely depends on how popular he thinks it is.