

Local Politics Is Hard Work: Anticipating the Coming Nation-wide US Election

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Politics, especially local politics, is hard work. Easier to share headlines flashed at us through the national press. There's always another juicy or outrageous anecdote to absorb, dismiss, or share. So our political conversations keep advancing. Maybe.

Following local political trends at my county level (in upstate New York's Catskills^[1]) is another matter. I suspect my problem would apply to downstate too.

I just want to carry out my democratic duty at election time. Voting could help build a local political barrier to thwart threats charging towards us from Washington. Yet I find myself facing one obstacle after another. Perusing local political issues in advance of Tuesday's nationwide election, I feel stymied and isolated.

If I weren't so dogged, I'd forget about democracy altogether; this business of voting responsibly needs sustained attention and real commitment. Take the question of who's running for office in our towns (in this "off-election" year): now is when we select our supervisors, judges, and town councils, among others. It's not only a humdrum affair; it's often obscure. Most voters don't know who presently holds these offices, and, for example, if the sheriff is an elected official. And new candidates? Not easy to learn their identities and what party they represent.

Since the last local election (two years ago?), admittedly I've not been as active as I might have. So I ask others: "What happens at town council meetings between elections? Few can tell me. (It's a drag getting to a town meeting after work and tending to family needs at supertime.)

I know town councils assign our tax money. But do citizens approve the budget? I don't know. Would that be on the November 7th ballot? What about our dwindling fire department—is its future a town issue? Can we take problems in the district school to our council? What about the decrepit bridge on South Street? Our local opioid crisis?

I've been a fulltime resident here for 20 years. As a registered Democrat, I usually check any democratic candidate box on the ballot. Afterwards I forget about council business. I rarely follow these election results anyway. (You may think I'm a shirker but I'm sure I'm typical of folks here.)

I confess, I may have been inattentive, initially. Six years ago, I decided to better prepare myself before casting my ballot. I would do my homework. My good intentions notwithstanding, I could learn little about local candidates: campaign literature was scarce;

some lawn signs planted here and there, but no calls and no personal canvassing. Worse, perusing a ballot on Election Day, I found I had few choices –incumbents were running unopposed. Often the names meant nothing to me.

One year, seeing an invitation to meet candidates for town offices before a local election, I stopped in at our fire hall. I found more candidates than potential voters present. Moreover, this was a Republican Party event, and all four candidates greeting us were Republicans. I was welcome however; the pastries were tasty and I could ask about the offices being sought—town judgeship for example.

Optimistically, I phoned the Democratic Party office. Maybe it would sponsor a candidates' gathering here. I called several times. No reply, not even to steer me to a webpage. Speaking with neighbors, I learned many are on the same page as me politically. About candidates and the local party committee, they shrug. "No use voting." As for local governance: no one I ask is clear when town meetings take place, who are the supervisor (mayor), highway chief, council members. "Phone the town clerk," I'm advised. "Try the board of elections."

A party committee member helped explain the local structure to me. "You're represented by so-and-so, a good fellow but can't attend meetings. Do you want to be a committee member? You wouldn't have to do anything." They just needed a name.

Any resident can sit in on a local party meetings; same for the town council. "Very boring; they do what they want", I am told by my neighbor, Elena.

Sometimes people get stirred up—if a child dies from substance abuse, or if crime is on the rise. Disputes about sharing resources get attention too: water management, which district should pay police, enforcing zoning laws. These issues can bring out citizens and often involve lengthy legal disputes. Otherwise it's humdrum bureaucratic stuff, and difficult for an outsider—a citizen—to follow.

The widespread victory of Republicans in January saw a flurry of activity from the opposing side, generated mainly by shock (and embarrassment). Attendance at party meetings spiked. People networked, sharing their fears and outrage, vowing to become 'politically engaged'—some for the first time in their (middle-aged) lives. Activist groups blossomed.

Here in New York State an important referendum is on Tuesday's ballot—do we want a new state constitution? It's complicated. So we've seen many public forums and debates over the past weeks. Newspapers and legal organizations, the League of Women Voters and some unions have endorsed, or opposed. At one presentation in a sizable town nearby, about 15 people sat scattered through a large hall to hear details and ask questions. When the discussion ended, half the audience left hurriedly. Among those remaining, five were candidates running for seats in the town's administration, there to address voters.

All our regional papers have noted how few seats are being contested. "Sullivan County has 55 uncontested races" moans [The River Reporter](#) . [The Walton paper](#) notes that most candidates are incumbents running unopposed. [October 3rd front page](#) of another concurs—"General election marked by lack of candidates." Perusing the past three issues of [Times Herald Record](#), our main regional paper, I see a flurry of 30 'letters to the editor'—each one espousing the merits of a candidate. Maybe that's the most a reader will learn about the names they'll find on Tuesday's ballot.

Oh well, there's always another election.

Notes:

[1] Sullivan County with a population of about 78,000 and Delaware County with almost 48,000 residents)

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