

Despite media coverage of politics, voters not likely to choose carefully, UW professor says

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Despite massive media coverage of the 2008 election, most Americans will make poorly considered decisions about their choices, says John Gastil, a communication professor at the University of Washington. The upcoming Washington caucuses will be no exception, but there are solutions, he says.

"Voters are making decisions, often erratically, by following faint cues like a bloodhound sniffing with a stuffed-up nose," says John Gastil, author of a recently published book, "Political Communication and Deliberation."

Poorly weighed decisions are almost inevitable, he says. People are busy, and for many, election decisions are simply one more task.

"Voters without considerable political acumen simply average what they hear and read in the media to arrive at a kind of summary view. Even if campaigns and media provided more substance, the average voter would most likely absorb it uncritically," Gastil says.

Caucuses, which take place Saturday in Washington state, are good but don't foster real deliberation, he adds.

"They force people to meet their fellow citizens face to face. If you hold a different view, the caucus forces you to account for it. That really can happen at caucuses, but more often, they are simply a complicated exercise in counting where people's shoes end up on a gym floor."

The caucus, according to Gastil, is really just a different method of counting candidate preferences--not a discussion or debate.

Gastil proposes a number of ways to increase voter deliberation, including:

- **Changing voting rules:** Instead of voters each choosing one candidate, they would rank them. This would encourage serious consideration of multiple points of view for any given election and broaden public debate.
- **Citizen panels and voting guides:** Random-sample citizen panels would deliberate for one week on the most important initiatives and candidate races. At the end, the panels would write summary descriptions of positions and vote for or against measures and candidates. The information would then be distributed as an official voter guide.
- **Citizen involvement after elections:** To reconnect citizens with the most important national issues, people need to be involved in ongoing policy discussions. Presidential candidate John Edwards proposed a process that would involve a million Americans, and Gastil's book showcases similar efforts in cities, states and other nations.

In other chapters of Gastil's book, he says media monopolies limit public debate, partisan pressures warp Congressional debates and political conversations reinforce prejudices.

On a more hopeful note, however, he also reviews ways civic reformers are trying to change the way Americans hold public meetings. He promotes a new kind of community politics and journalism that encourages public deliberation. For example, citizen assemblies in Canada and citizen juries in the U.S. and Australia have assembled random groups of lay people to analyze policy issues and make recommendations to policy makers.

"Together," Gastil says, "reforms like these can help the United States transform itself into a more deliberative form of democracy."

Source: University of Washington

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