

A Desultory Election Day in America

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

By 10 a.m. Tuesday morning, voting would have trailed off in some polling stations, after “workers” stopped in before setting out for their jobs—in schools, restaurants, county offices and on construction sites. There might be a rush after dark when people head home. That’s why polls open at 6 a.m. and close at 9 at night.

In our small town however, when I arrive mid-morning, it’s busy—relatively.

A few moments earlier, heading for the fire department hall that functions as our voting center, I meet a neighbor at the bridge. We halt our cars and roll down the windows; “Who should I vote for?”, Susan calls out.

I don’t hesitate even though there’s little to offer: “Look for the 3 propositions: the first is about a new constitutional convention for New York state; people who I know are voting against. Of the other two, one is for protection of wild land; you’ll want to vote ‘yes’ there. I forget the third”. (It was pensions being withheld or retained for any official convicted of a crime.) Susan is listening but I see her interest waning.

What more is there to advise? “There are no candidates on the Democratic Party ticket” I admit, lowering my voice out of shame. “All the incumbents —Republicans, it seems— are running for a second term, unopposed.” Those are for the officers and council members who run our town, and dispense our tax revenue. (Examining the ballot later, I learn that indeed, the town sheriff is an elected position. He is one of those 8 or 9 unopposed incumbents.)

Later that day, I meet Diane. “Yes, I voted. It makes no difference”, she laments. Still, she did cast a ballot, and so did another 125 villagers. It’s considered a good turnout—for an “off-election” year. (That’s what they call it, sadly.) Or is it an off-year election? Either way it refers to non-presidential and non-Congress competitions. Stupidly, people don’t take these local affairs seriously.

At the polling station itself, I linger after submitting my ballot. Not to do a private exit poll, but to socialize with the election monitors. (Three of the four are my neighbors.) They’d been on duty since 5 a.m. setting up the ballots, voter lists and private booths. Although not allowed to campaign or discuss candidates or balloting, we can enjoy coffee and biscuits together and talk about past elections.

By 6 p.m., listening to New York area news, I learn the Democratic NYC mayor has done well and will have a second term. The referendum for the state constitutional convention was defeated. There’s no change in our “upstate” political profile however. Maybe in 2018?

The next morning, all the “progressive” orgs are flooding my inbox, celebrating huge victories. The tide is turning, they shout. Two new Democratic governors are in—one in

Virginia and one in New Jersey. This news and some announcements about a county office, a mayoral post, here and there, turning over to Democrats are hailed as if Donald Trump, the Alt-Right, the banks, the Supreme Court and rest of the US establishment are routed, and the underdog Dems have taken over Washington.

Maybe the exaggeration is a strategy to mobilize lethargic and despondent “progressives”. Even the smallest victory can re-energize the base. Maybe it’s a tactic to stimulate cash donations for the party.

Meanwhile Republicans still control Congress—the Senate and the House of Representatives—and most of the governorships.

Two years is not much time to mobilize, especially when the nation’s (only) alternative party is in disarray, and the party machinery at the local level (in New York for example) is dysfunctional. But this is a temperamental nation where major shifts can occur in a very short time. In some parts of the world, they would call this instability.

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