

The American people are very unhappy with their government

Great majorities disapprove of the performance of Congress. In fact, it has been years since Congress enjoyed the confidence of more than 20% of Americans. And yet, despite this great dissatisfaction, the same people keep getting elected again and again. A sitting Congressperson has a chance of over 90% to be re-elected.

Why can't we elect people who would do a good job?

Why can't we throw the bums out? Is it really that difficult to find someone who would represent the ideas and interests of the average person, rather than some extremist view or special interest? Honest, hardworking, sensible people are not that hard to find. Polls find that Americans trust other Americans much more than they trust politicians. But then, why can't we get those good people into office?

What do voters know about a candidate?

Very little. All voters know about a candidate they know through the messages they get through the media – either as political ads, or as editorials and news items. All of those sources are being manipulated by interested parties – the candidate, or his opponents or other people with various opinions and interests. Such information as

voters have about a candidate would never, for example, be admissible in court as evidence. It would be summarily dismissed as unreliable hearsay.

So how do voters decide?

Since voters know essentially nothing of importance about the candidates, they have no choice but to rely on trivialities. Popular elections are therefore just a popularity contest: people vote based on image, gossip, mood, slogans, external appearance and such considerations.

What do voters know about candidates?

While voters know next-to-nothing about individual candidates, they know quite a bit about candidates as a group – as a type. Voters know that candidates are ambitious, well-connected people. They are backed by a party bureaucracy and by deep pocketed individuals or organizations. They have proven themselves loyal and useful to their backers. They are therefore very different from the voters. Indeed, it would be quite surprising if the way candidates see the world is similar to that of the voters. And with a different worldview comes a different set of priorities. It is therefore only natural to expect that the candidates – once elected – would implement public policy that is very

different from the policy that the voters would like to see.

What is the alternative?

The way out of this trap is to put in office regular people – those same regular people who enjoy the trust of other regular people.

How can regular people be put in office?

There is an ingenious device that does exactly that – the lottery. When the time comes to select new Congresspeople, the names of all Americans are put in a hat and a few hundred names are drawn at random. Those who are drawn serve as Congresspeople for one term, after which they go back to their regular lives.

That sounds very strange, who came up with this?

This idea, called elections-by-lot, or sortition, is a very old idea. The original democracy – the city of Athens – used elections-by-lot to select almost all of its office holders. And in fact it is being used today in the U.S. – to appoint trial juries. If we trust average people with life-and-death decisions, why shouldn't we trust them with legislation?