

Primaries may not be best for picking party candidates

WARNING: This column contains unpopular and possibly distasteful thinking. Reading it may offend some of your long-held assumptions about the workings of our democracy.

Michigan election law says that voters in primary elections must vote in only one party's race. So if you wanted to vote for state Sen. John (Joe) Schwarz against Lt. Gov. Dick Posthumus in the Republican primary but then vote for U.S. Rep. John Dingell against Rep. Lynn Rivers in the Democratic race, you couldn't. (Or, if you did, your ballot would be thrown out.)



Phil Power

It now turns out that something like a quarter million ballots from last week's primary election were spoiled by people trying to do exactly that. And now Secretary of State Candice Miller says she wants Michigan to allow crossover voting in primary elections.

Sounds reasonable, doesn't it. After all, in a democracy the people should pick the candidates, not the political party insiders sitting in what used to be smog-filled rooms. Political parties don't pay for elections; the taxpayers do.

And in Michigan a plurality of voters identify themselves as Independents, not as Democrats or Republicans, and mass ticket splitting is an honored tradition. Why should Independents and ticket splitters be discriminated against?

Here's why. Primary elections are held to determine which candidates from what parties shall be nominated to run for office in the general election. It's the parties' business - and that of people who affiliate themselves with a given party - to select who shall represent the party in general elections. If the primary voters for a given party pick a weak candidate, that's just tough luck.

As a practical matter, the only nationwide organization (to use the word loosely) institutions in our political system are the two major parties. So far as I know, Independents don't field a slate of candidates in general elections, and the miscellaneous Greens, Libertarians and Naderites still don't count for much. Allowing crossover voting would merely add to the half-century long diminution of the political parties as the major institutions in our democracy.

But my heresy goes farther. Frankly, I'm skeptical about primary elections as the presently sanctified method by which the parties nominate candidates. I have two reasons. Low turnout primary elections allow "true believers" - minority but very active hard-core ideologues from one side or the other - too large a role in selecting the candidate with the best chance to win in November.

Moreover, primary elections give entirely too

much weight in the political process to the news media - reporters, editorial writers and columnists like myself.

Take last week's Republican primary. Sure, Dick Posthumus swamped Joe Schwarz in the

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gubernatorial primary, largely because he was the candidate of the institutionalized right wing of the GOP.

But virtually every political expert in the state agrees that Schwarz would have been a far more formidable opponent for Jennifer Granholm, the Democratic nominee, in the November general election.

On the Democratic side, you have only to remember how wealthy (and therefore well known, thanks to TV advertising) but otherwise unqualified trial lawyer Geoffrey Feiger unexpectedly won the primary election four years ago. He was trumped big time by John Engler in November.

The pattern is not confined to Michigan. In California, businessman William Simon Jr. defeated moderate former Los Angeles Mayor Dick Riordan, and looks like a loser against not so popular incumbent Gov. Gray Davis.

New Jersey went Democratic last year when Republican primary voters rejected a moderate candidate for governor and nominated a vehemently pro-voucher, anti-abortion candidate. This year in Illinois and Pennsylvania, it looks like the same thing is happening.

Years ago, I used to sit in on "midnight caucuses" (in what were back then) smoke-filled rooms. I was impressed with how well the political pros knew the strengths and weaknesses of various candidates, how accurately they estimated their appeal to the general electorate, and how clearly they realized that their own power depended on their picking a nominee who could win in November.

By substituting the "popular vote" - i.e. one heavily influenced by ideologues on the one hand and the news media on the other - for the informed judgment of political insiders, primary elections in practice skew the nomination process and often result in weak candidates being nominated.

If that's heresy, don't say I didn't warn you.

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734)953-2205 or at power@homecomm.net.



Greg Migliore

All kinds of kids drink for all kinds of reasons

It's 11:30 on a Friday night. Do you know where your kids are?

There's a good chance they might be drinking. No you say, not my kids. That's what the "bad" kids do.

Well, there's a good chance your kids actually are the ones you've warned them about.

Underage drinking takes on many forms. It can be the young teen-ager experimenting with alcohol for the first time and dreading getting caught, or the 20-year-old college student who drinks regularly and doesn't care who knows.

Kids drink for all kinds of reasons. They do it to fit in. They do it because it's fun. They do it to forget their problems.

And a lot of kids drink. There is no way around it. That's not to say all kids drink, but they're all susceptible to it.

Some kids drink with 1.7 grade point averages. Kids usually have plenty of time to do it. But kids with 3.7s drink too, because when they're done with classes, they want to have fun.

It's true that kids who participate in activities are less likely to engage in substance abuse, but it's a guarantee. The high school athletes and student council members could just as easily be drinking as the shady guys in the back of class.

The question is, is underage drinking a problem?

Ask a young person and he would probably say no, there is not a problem, at least not for them.

However, on a number of fronts, it obviously is. Young people think they're invincible. There's a lot of 30-year-olds who don't like to admit they're drunk. Try telling 18-year-olds they've had too much. Alcohol-related car accidents are the biggest reason to continue to crack down on young drinkers.

Alcohol also obviously interferes with school. In high school, most kids live at home, and if they are often "sick," there's probably a reason. There are different levels of drinking. Some kids drink once a month and have air-tight plans to keep it from parents.

Others disappear on the weekends, and when they're seldom coming home, it means they're probably doing more than staying at a friend's house. Finally there are the kids whose only qualification for drinking is that the day must end in "y."

Kids can get alcohol unbelievably easily. They have older friends they need to buy for them. They get fake IDs that often work, no matter how bad they are. They also steal it from work or their parents.

Underage drinkers can be extremely clever too. Sure they shoplift if they're really desperate for a drink, but they also do things like leave full kegs out with the empties to be picked up later.

Some kids run fake ID rings. Their operations are extremely sophisticated, and it's seldom the guy you think it is. Yeah, it could be the guy who runs a drug operation, but it also could be the guy who goes to youth group meetings at church.

This also begs the question, is it necessary to be hard on underage drinkers? In some countries if you are old enough to see over the bar, you can drink, and our neighbors to the north have a legal age of 19.

And like I said earlier, kids can be extremely clever. The problem is, however, after they have gone to all the trouble of getting it, they often are pretty stupid.

'Walk around a college campus late at night and you'll probably see some 19-year-old who went to great extremes to get his beer drinking along side a major road.'

Walk around a college campus late at night and you'll probably see some 19-year-old who went to great extremes to get his beer drinking alongside a major road. It's like the logic disappears.

And when the logic leaves them, that's when drinking becomes a problem for kids. The lucky ones stagger home and go to bed. Maybe some get tickets or a night in jail to sober up if they're dumb enough (or drunk enough) to be acting stupid in public.

The unlucky ones end up on the news. And that's where parents come in. Most of them are in the dark. The ones who aren't are in denial. Parents probably can't stop their kids from drinking at all times, but they can help to keep them safer.

Maybe your kids drink once a month. Is it the end of the world? Probably not. But if you don't tell them how you feel about it or try to understand what is going on, they'll be the ones with the fake ID ring - or worse.

Greg Migliore is an intern who spent this summer working for Observer newspapers. He, Christine Broda and Katy Baldorff together worked on the teens and drinking project featured in this and last Sunday's issues.

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