

How Politics Works

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by Ed Corrigan, BA, MA, LL.B.

With apologies to Carl von Clausewitz, politics is war continued by other means. Many political activists, environmental and other, want to influence decision makers and effect political change. Activists convinced of their cause get frustrated when they cannot get elected politicians to vote their way. Faced by this inability to influence decision makers, many activists get alienated from the political process. Both sides on an issue will lobby politicians and the strongest campaign usually determines the outcome.

The failed campaign to have London city council adopt a bylaw prohibiting the cosmetic use of pesticides, is an excellent case in point. Despite packing the gallery at City Hall, having the support of the Medical Officer of Health with considerable medical evidence to back their cause, and the support of a large majority in the public opinion polls, council voted 15 to 3 against a Bylaw on pesticides. The majority of council chose to listen to the lawn care and chemical companies and adopted a plan supported by the pesticide industry.

In an example of a recent successful political campaign the anti-smoking lobby bombarded each member of City Council with more than a 1000 e-mails and showed that they had political power behind their cause. This expression of power convinced wavering members of City Council that it was politically prudent to support a bylaw to ban smoking in public places. This battle was won despite a determined campaign from the tobacco lobby and their allies in the restaurant and bar business.

Part of the problem, in my opinion, is that activists do not understand what motivates elected politicians or how to influence them. Politics is about power. It is about the ability to get things done and make things happen. It is a military exercise and an organizational task. Those who get elected make the decisions. In politics perception is reality. But in electoral politics, reality is the vote in the election.

Many people who are alienated from politics refuse to participate in the political process. For them this abstention is a political statement. However, those who do not participate in the political process are destined to be governed by those who do.

Contempt for politics is a device for masking subservience to those who know how to make the political system work for them.

Activists must learn how to make the political system work for them. In the November 2000 London Municipal election voter turnout was only 32.75%. Those that voted determined who got elected. The 67.25% of Londoners who did not vote had no say in who controls City Hall. They

gave up their political rights to those who voted. Some elections in London have been decided by as few as 6 votes.

Elections are the key pressure point in the system. How to have an impact in elections is the critical question. Politics is about power. Expression of power comes in many forms.

MONEY POWER

First there is money in the form of campaign donations. Corporations get to write off political donations as business expenses. Groups and individuals can also donate money. Some Ontario cities give individuals tax credits for political donations at the municipal level. London does not. It is easy to see why developers and other businesses that make tax supported donations have influence with elected politicians. There is no point complaining about this fact, this is reality. Money pays for advertising, signs, pamphlet distribution and even workers. Money donated to political campaigns helps determine the outcome.

If you want to have political impact donate to candidates that support your views. Organizations can host fund-raising parties and raise money from individuals and businesses. It is easy to see why elected politicians are very attentive to those who donate to political campaigns and ignore those who do not. The system also tends to eliminate those who do not have adequate financial resources and favours those who can raise money for political campaigns. Politicians are very aware of who makes donations.

PEOPLE POWER

Money is not the only form of power in politics. Organization is also critical. Community groups have people power. Showing support by providing sign locations to a political candidate is effective. Public expressions of support help attract votes and build up name recognition to help a candidate win. Door to door canvassing and other techniques of communication of political support are also very important. Put your issues on the election agenda. Use your newsletters. Use the internet. A small group of people who work together in an organized fashion for a candidate for a ten-week period once every three years can have a huge political impact. Elections are a competitive exercise.

The point is get involved. Endorse and support candidates who support positions important to you. Take a sign, make a donation, volunteer time, get the vote out for candidates who support your positions and most importantly, VOTE!

This is how elections are won and lost, and how issues are decided. You will have the opportunity to help decide the composition of your City Council this coming November. It is up to you, how you participate, and you will have to live with the result.

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"Ten people who speak make more noise than ten thousand who are silent." Napoleon Bonaparte

"Most people are willing to change not because they see the light, but because they feel the heat." Unknown

"Politics is the gentle art of getting votes from the poor and campaign funds from the rich by promising to protect each from the other." Labor organizer Oscar Ameringer

"The net is more than an organizing tool - it has become an organizing model, a blueprint for decentralized but cooperative decision-making. It facilitates the process of information sharing to such an extent that many groups can work in concert with one another without the need to achieve monolithic consensus." Naomi Klein, No Logo

"Recognition is the greatest motivator." - Gerard C. Eakedale

Assassination is the extreme form of censorship.
George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

Bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote.

George Jean Nathan

Politics, of course, requires sweat, work, combat, and organization. But these should not be ugly words for a free people.

Nelson Rockefeller