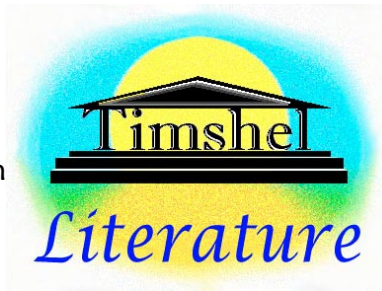


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Just Thinking, 11/04/02:

Voting: Finally Becoming an Urgent Cause

by Justin Katz

This past Friday, the last Friday before I officially exercise my right to vote for the first time this side of a primary, talk radio host Michael Savage expressed apathy. Somehow, although this seems to me to be the most crucial – and close – election in my young memory, he couldn't think of a reason to vote. He cited the condemnation of "Republicrats" – that there's no difference between the two parties.

As a periodic listener to his show, I've found Mr. Savage, although conservative, to be impulsive. To be fair, that's part of his entertainment charm. Nonetheless, his angst on Friday was based on a single, foreign newspaper report that the Bush administration had decided not to go to war with Iraq as well as on the President's whirlwind fundraising/voter-motivation tour. Despite the amazing layout of Air Force One, Mr. Savage would feel more comfortable if the President were chained to his desk, making hourly announcements that the war is still on the agenda and, when it was still unsolved, that the full force of the federal government was on the D.C. sniper's trail.

Somehow even intelligent people fail to understand that the processes of politics, as petty and distasteful as they may seem, are inextricable from the workings of the government. The

system was designed that way. At this political juncture, working to increase his party's strength in Congress, specifically the Senate, may be the single-most-effective step that the President can take toward solving many of the problems against which conservatives like Savage habitually rail. I'll be honest that I'm not optimistic about certain issues, such as immigration, even in the hands of the current batch of Republicans. However, many issues on which the Republicans, generally, and Bush, specifically, are currently being stymied would lay the groundwork to advance solutions. National security is the biggest; conservative judges are crucial as well; myriad specific issues float about in the mix.

The current political reality reveals the limits of a related platitude about voting: the "independent" aesthetic of "I vote for the man, not the party." That's all well and good, as far as it goes, when that one "man" won't so dramatically tip the scales. Even then, citizens rarely have the opportunity to vote for a candidate who is truly willing to "buck the system." Perhaps this factor — a combination of politics being a career and the exigencies of internal diplomacy — contributes to the perception that the choice is very subtle between the parties, and mostly a matter of image.

Look at New York City Republican Mayor Bloomberg. His anti-smoking crusade is an initiative of the sort generally associated with the left wing. But, yes, let's look at Bloomberg. He was a last-minute Republican who won the party's nomination in a world with different priorities. After September 11, 2001, the desire to take back that nomination and hand it to somebody more deserving, more true, was palpable.

Perhaps voting will prove to be a part of American life that can be placed in the much-too-thin "Things That Changed on 9/11" file. Here in Rhode Island, the two big races are for Congress and for governor, and neither Republican was the party's choice in the primaries. Both of their platforms are very conservative and geared toward curbing corruption. Moreover, they are both worthy of "I vote for the man" support. Their campaigns have been grassroots. Their side is

that which is on the advance, spurred by the awakened anger of the previously idle voters who have finally had enough.

The image that comes to mind when I think of elections of the past decade is of high school physics lessons about potential energy. Elections have hinged not so much on policies — certainly not on worthwhile candidates — as on which side was able, through manipulation of issues and promises, to break the inertia of the group of people who were already sympathetic. The advantage on this count has been to the Democrats because they appealed to the malcontents. Now, for the first time in years, a high turnout would likely benefit the Republicans.

I think there's been a shift, and the galvanized crowd wants changes that are only plausible coming from the political right. In other words, the only hope is toward "reforming" the Republican Party, one candidate at a time. Michael Savage's litmus-test slogan is "Borders, Language, Culture," and I agree that the present administration is not as strong in this area as I'd like. But — because the issue is crucial and the position correct — the stronger candidates are coming up behind, I'm confident. At this point, as we begin the process (hopefully) of flushing the rot of complacency out of the government, our objective must be to avert the reformation of old clogs. Mr. Savage answered his own question about reasons for voting when he played a clip of Patrick Kennedy espousing "undocumented workers" terminology — barely a year after September 11. It strikes me as a risky proposition to maintain momentum for two more years, even if the position is right, the beliefs true, and the cause urgent.