

My Campaign, Tis of Thee

A First Run at Public Office, and I Forgot My Camera

By Paul Sracic

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YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio—The late British essayist **G.K.** Chesterton, that always quotable observer of American life, once wrote that what separated English and American politics was that Americans retained what he called the “romance of the citizen.” Though I have read this quote many times (since it is from my favorite book, “What I Saw in America”), I did not begin to fully understand its depth until one recent Friday. It was on that day that I shuffled into the Mahoning County Board of Elections to file petitions which, for the first time in my life, would place my name on an election ballot.

Although I have been teaching and writing about politics for almost a decade, I had never given much thought to running for public office. When I circulated my petitions, seeking the 50 signatures I needed to qualify, many of my fellow academics tried to dissuade me from what they saw as a endeavor. They argued that a) I did not stand a chance of win, and b) even if I won, why would I want to leave the peaceful, anonymous world of a tenured associate professor for the public hell that political life has become?

But in recent times in our county, we have seen a sheriff, a prosecutor, a commissioner and several judges sent to jail for corruption. Even the national media types have taken note of our problems: *George* magazine recently ranked Youngstown, the county seat (pop. 85,000 and falling) as among the 10 most corrupt cities in America. (In response, one local political boss was quoted as saying that, after all, *George* was probably one of the 10 worst political magazines.) Something, I thought, had to change.

For years I had been urging my students not to succumb to cynicism and to engage in political life. During class discussions about Thucydides or Aristotle—those classic promoters of civic virtue whose names, I promise, will not be appearing in my campaign literature—I have been known to become passionate about citizens getting involved in politics. Of course, I felt a bit hypocritical at times. After all, my own participation was limited to voting and the occasional op-ed

commentary. So when one of my former students, who is now Executive director of the county Republican Party, asked me if I would run for one of the three county commissioner seats, I felt obliged to take his question seriously. Still, it took many phone calls, and a lot of soul-searching, before I reluctantly said "maybe" and began collecting signatures.

So, when I wrote that I "shuffled" into the Board of Elections office on filing day, to file my petitions, I meant it literally. I had this gnawing fear that I was about to become tarnished. What I saw however, when I entered the large auditorium like room was a scene right out of a Norman Rockwell painting. It was nothing short of inspiring. Indeed, it made me feel a bit embarrassed. Where I had come alone with my head down – a bit like one of those freshly arrested defendants being rushed into the police station hiding his face under his coat—most of those who sought to join me on the ballot had come with their families. Many had even brought cameras.

More than anything, the event resembled a high school graduation. And I began to think to myself how oddly appropriate this was, since all of us were being graduated into full civic life. The classic notion of citizenship, that of being both ruled and ruler, usually goes only half-fulfilled. So I began to feel much better as I walked up to the counter to file my petitions. When the clerk handed me a paperback book with a picture of the state flag on the cover, I was hoping that it was a copy of the state constitution; that would have made the moment perfect.

When I looked at the book, however, I saw the words "1999 Ohio Campaign Finance Reporting Handbook." That brought me back down to earth and reminded me that, for the next few months, I would be spending as much time asking for money as I would talking about honesty and vision in county government.

Yet the moment was not completely lost. Why? Because I was taken in by the romance of being a citizen. This is exactly what Chesterton, meant. Now, I am a political scientist, and I know that the time between now and the first Tuesday in November (if I make it that far) will be exhausting, humbling and maybe even humiliating. But romance is all about looking beyond the flaws of the object of one's affection. And, of course, romance is a very important part of any real commitment that demands sacrifice, Maybe I will change my mind, but right now, even if I were to lose, I can imagine running for some office again. And next time, I think I'll bring my own camera.

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