

Democracy an Imperfect Instrument

By Jim Nowlan

Democracies have been screwing up at least since an Athenian jury of 500 citizens sentenced Socrates to death for teachings that displeased them. Democracy has never been a perfect instrument. How do we reduce the number of bad choices that we make at the voting booth?

In his book on Illinois governors through history, the late historian Robert Howard characterizes our chief executives as “mostly good and competent men.” That’s actually a pretty good track record for a citizenry that can be gullible and apathetic.

Yet it appears we voters blew it in twice electing ex-governor Rod Blagojevich, who now embarrasses daily whatever good name Illinois has remaining.

Four of the last seven governors have been convicted of crimes: Otto Kerner (Democrat); Dan Walker (D), for crime committed after leaving office; George Ryan (R), and Blagojevich (D). Dick Ogilvie (R), Jim Thompson (R), and Jim Edgar (R) came out unscathed. Have we voters lost our touch?

Are candidates and voters different from in the past? Most all the candidates across our history have had high ambitions, strong need to be liked and approved of, and a willingness to run down a punishing gauntlet to be elected. Voters have generally been inattentive, apathetic and vulnerable to being hoodwinked by razzle-dazzle from candidates and more recently by ever more poisonous attack ads.

Our history provides examples to rival our more recent lapses in public integrity. In 1912, Illinois U.S. Senator William Lorimer (R) was ejected from the Senate by his peers for allegedly bribing up to 40 Illinois state legislators to vote for him (which prompted a constitutional amendment on popular election of senators). In the 1920s, duly elected Frank L. Smith (R) was denied his seat in the U.S. Senate by a vote of the senators because of unseemly, huge contributions from utility magnate Samuel Insull. Also in the 1920s, we had the outrageous, thrice-elected Chicago mayor Big Bill Thompson, who brought live rats onto his speaking platforms to represent his opponents and turned a blind eye to gangster Al Capone.

Many of us voters are indeed gullible. In 1972, for example, city slicker Dan Walker wore a red bandana and walked the state from top to bottom, generating widespread publicity and word-of-mouth buzz. Along the way, he defeated Paul Simon, a paragon of virtue, and incumbent governor Dick Ogilvie, a might oak among saplings for his courage in enacting a state income tax (disclosure: I was Ogilvie's runningmate).

Blagojevich isn't our first mistake.

There are differences between the recent past and the more distant past. The highly personal medium of television has made it easier for well-funded candidates to trash their opponents with half-truths and gross distortions. For example, Blagojevich used 20,000-plus mocking, ridiculing television spots to destroy the persona of a good, competent, honest person in Judy Baar Topinka, his opponent. Many voters believed the television ads.

Federal prosecutors have also become much more aggressive in recent decades in seeking out wrongdoing. Had it been so in Illinois' history, I think more public officials through history would have been convicted than was the case.

So, no, I don't think candidates and voters are much different in recent decades than in the past. I do think the ex-governor Blagojevich is *sui generis*, one of a kind, an outlier on the spectrum of political candidates, whose bizarre behavior could not have been foreseen during his first campaign for governor.

So what can be done to protect us from more Blagojeviches and to redeem our state's image. Here is Nowlan's Guide to Responsible Voting:

- Don't support candidates who make big promises; change is incremental.
- Don't support candidates who use their campaign funds to trash their opponents. They must not have much good to say about themselves.
- Don't believe TV spots that ridicule an opposing candidate; instead, oppose the candidate who runs the ads.

Finally, become outraged. Demand term limits and public financing of campaigns from your state legislators. Let's bring amateur, citizen-lawmakers back into the process.