

Howard O’Cull: WV voters should assert themselves as more than political customers

By **Howard O’Cull**
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Ever-wearying television advertisements, the chum pitched by campaign ideology traffickers, seek to reduce elections to smear-shaming bouts, deflecting voters’ attention from the enormous challenges facing the state.

This election, the most important since the state’s 1930s reorganization, is about two words: scarce resources. In a larger sense, voters on Nov. 8 select the political party whose policies determine West Virginia’s future for generations.

We’ve been down this path. Speaking policy is a true political liability, although history is not kind to the notion that a society can be built on happy talk.

Plainly stated: West Virginia cannot maintain all the government it has, especially at the school district level, given persistent student enrollment declines. The state’s economy has thrown a rod, but it is revivable. The warm fuzzy rhetoric industry representatives spill in newspaper columns statewide, namely to rely on the Cain and Abel coal-natural gas industries, is a short-term fix. The state has an aging population; citizens fret over possible tax hikes, while clamoring for better infrastructure. There is a palpable disgust with government itself at all levels. Our opioid drug crisis — a crisis fueled largely by many West Virginia citizens’ lapse of hope for a brighter tomorrow — provides a funerary cast which cannot easily be displaced.

To dis politicians or candidates is fulfilling only if one ignores the fact that voters are largely responsible for the condition of the state through the politicians we elect.

Unless we discover self-governance, electing political leaders who see citizens as the interest group that matters, citizens cannot direct policy, including economic policy, or develop accountability structures to ensure elected officials are responsive to citizen-inspired needs.

As a citizenry, we have succumbed to West Virginia's rampant malady, namely state-level politicians have singular ownership to fix state problems. This isn't a call for simple majority rule. Rather, the plea is for citizens to have a greater role in policy determination.

Learning often requires unlearning: The state's political leaders demonstrate another fundamental of West Virginia politics — that is, adherence to a reverse patron/client relationship. Voters, who place politicians in office (the patrons) often find themselves as clients of these politicians because voters cannot muster the influence of organized interest groups — right or left, business or labor, whatever interest — who have the money, numbers and who monitor legislative session behavior. These actions ensure sponsored politicians remain accountable to these organized groups' ideals — often buffered by political party operatives, voting “score cards.”

This setup validates the early 1970s work of political scientist Theodore Lowi. He concluded U.S elections are scheduled contests between competing interest groups. Thus, we use elections to elect political leaders or, better stated, to elect or validate that elected politicians' affiliations which, of course, means the citizenry inherits special interests — interests many voters might spurn. Therefore, political parties largely determine the strategic collective of special interests to which the party offers its labeled candidates.

Of course, things are worse. This Titanic appears to be buckling amid squalls ushered by external change, international policy shifts, changing social values and ideals — not to mention a \$300 million hole in next year's state budget.

All isn't bleak: Citizens — and certainly politicians — must dump the endless refrain, “better days are coming ... we promise,” the dogma

permeating West Virginia's official civic/political religion, namely "political fatalism."

We need courageous ground action.

In that West Virginians have not learned to govern, steering grassroots-generated policy aims to Charleston, we continually murmur displeasure toward elected officials for ignoring our needs. Then, through elections, we grant the state's titled/politicos greater reins to perpetually determine state-level policies of every sort. Accountability, murky at best, is left to politicians who continually declare policy success. Of course national tallies of states' well-being usually list West Virginia near the bottom.

Let's journey to a West Virginia where citizens maintain the primary responsibility for determining the state's future:

1. First, working with diverse community leaders, we establish continuous structured or "informed conversations" to achieve genuine citizen input for determining policy solutions for identified issues. Once formulated these "solutions" are directed from communities upward to address aims and goals through the appropriate governance levels.
2. Citizens' proposed policy solutions prove critical primarily because state and federal governments are ill-equipped to develop grass-roots solutions to local problems. Given interest group pressures to "Charlestonize" every local issue as primed for solving by sponsored lawmakers, citizens can break the dominance of state-driven policy, although much of what is "on the books" is rigged for state-level policy prescriptiveness.
3. Rather than diminishing the influence of candidates and political leaders, the citizen-inspired process becomes a means of accountability for both political leaders and the citizenry and will encourage greater knowledge of governance and citizen responsibilities.

Turning West Virginia around using these principles is difficult, requires hard work, commitment, the ability for citizens to set aside personal aims and agendas. There is the genuine possibility issues important to communities will be driven by what some consider low-brow exemplars — cash-and-carry

gun rights, traditionalist values, even ignorance of true community needs. Additionally, these initiatives will prove suspect to political and other community leaders.

These fears, however genuine, cannot displace citizens' needs to reorder West Virginia politics so citizens, representing their communities, lend credence to statehouse decision-making rather than seeing legislators as policy "dreamcatchers."

We reside in a state littered with the busted politics of interest groups who prop the state's titled, a few career politicians and the hangers-on who perpetuate this entire setup, crying a better, sunnier day is coming, just trust us.

West Virginians historically relied on others (usually out-of-staters) to build a state we would not have built; to christen that West Virginia as splendid; and then elect political leaders who see voters as their clients — political leaders enmeshed in upholding a teetering structure — a package of goods delivered to citizens without true citizen commitment.

Elections are only part of the equation. No matter who is elected, citizens remain accountable for rebuilding West Virginia one community at a time — helping sustain economic growth; addressing infrastructure needs, including broadband access; creating safe, humane communities where all are valued; relying on local folks, especially school employees, to create leaner, more efficient, community-accountable school systems. Finally, can or should the state maintain 55 county governments?

We are the ballot Nov. 8.

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