

Experimental politics

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One of the clichés of historians and civics textbooks is that the U.S. is an “experiment” in democracy. The inconclusive November 7 election and the subsequent wrangling over the certification of Florida’s votes have verified that it’s far from an empty cliché. This really is an experiment, and a very messy one.

Faced with the prospect of unending lawsuits, and realizing there are no precedents to guide the courts or the candidates, Americans have been able to appreciate the concerns of De Tocqueville and other early observers of the American project who wondered whether the American experiment in self-rule contained the remedies for its own inevitable ills. In light of the electoral impasse in Florida, Americans couldn’t help having their own doubts. To be specific: Does the American penchant for seeking justice in the courtroom constitute the solution or the problem?

Both Al Gore and George Bush have pressed the courts to consider what constitutes a valid recount. This is not a trivial issue. A careful recount of a close vote is an expected part of any American election, whether for student council or Congress. And however uneasy Americans have been with the prolonged uncertainty about the election, they have been more disturbed—and rightly so—by the prospect of a hurried and forced settlement.

Some citizens have said they are embarrassed or discouraged by the uncertainty of the result and by the partisan dueling that ensued. It seems to us, however, that events have revealed the resilience of the democratic process, and its ability to channel partisan politics into constructive debates. Questions about the legitimacy and the proper method of a recount—and the problems of the “punch card” voting system—are surely important enough to take to the public and to the courts, and perhaps even to the Supreme Court. That too is part of the American experiment.

Once the new president is named, however, a very different kind of creative and experimental task will be pressed upon the winner. The next president will take office with the most meager mandate imaginable. Indeed, the clear message issued on November 7 is that the people want someone who leads from the political middle.

The next president will be working not only with a minuscule margin of victory, but with a Congress that is almost evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans.

In this situation, two things can happen. One result—perhaps the most likely—is political gridlock. Each side can easily block the other's initiatives, and it will be tempting for each side to raise the political rhetoric and polarize the discussion, hoping to position themselves for greater political advantage in 2002 and 2004.

It is just possible, however, that this unusual situation will energize the moderates of both parties, and that we will see effective action on issues such as Social Security and health care. The president and Congress may realize that they have no choice but to emphasize common ground if they want anything to be accomplished. That would be another great experiment.