



Looking for a backbone stronger than butter

By Jim Waters

I grew up in a home where politics dominated many dinner conversations, and I admit that Election Day still holds a rush for me.

But politics has changed since I walked into the fire station around the corner from my small-town Indiana home 26 years ago and voted for the first time. The interest and competition for the races in my town made the ballot look like a Chinese buffet menu.

I was proud and excited. And for an 18-year-old, I was informed. I religiously followed the campaigns for local, state and national offices via the Wabash Plain Dealer.

Fast forward to 2008. I can best describe that eagerness and sense of anticipation I carried as a younger voter – and the belief that the choices made my vote matter – as diminished.

On May 20, I grudgingly headed to the polls, knowing I faced sparse and less-attractive choices than ever. Youth's idealism beat a hasty retreat under the siege of understanding how politics really work. And the facts about this year's primary races don't lie:

- In seven of the 13 primary races for Kentucky's U.S. House and Senate seats, voters faced a single choice.
- My count shows 110 of the 128 races for Kentucky House seats went uncontested.
- Only seven of 30 primary races for Kentucky Senate seats offered more than one candidate. Among those seven, victories went to a felon who spent time in prison and another who pleaded guilty to voter fraud in eastern Kentucky.
- Nearly 70 percent of the state's electorate didn't take this election seriously enough to vote.

What's happening to our country and commonwealth?

For one, politicians have sacrificed principles for political expediency.

I constantly challenge state lawmakers to stop looking for handouts and starting looking for a backbone.

"Be bolder," I say. "Tell labor bosses at the teachers unions, who oppose sound education policies like more choices for parents, firing incompetent teachers and financially rewarding good ones, to go fly a kite.

"Quit voting for debt-ridden, pork-laden budgets. Stop allowing entrenched political 'leaders,' who are status-quo defenders extraordinaire, to intimidate you to the point that you forget about your constituents back home."

Astoundingly, several responded with this twisted retort: "You have the luxury of just opining on the issues, but I must worry about the politics."

What these uninspiring politicians mean is that they cannot focus on issues for fear they might lose.

It's easier to make stump speeches and litter yards and roadways with meaningless signs than to address the developing disasters in our state – such as the state-worker pension-fund crisis.

Worrying about "politics" as Election Day approaches ignores the growing worry of taxpayers who face the continued extortion of their hard-earned money to support full-time pensions for part-time political horse-traders. The price tag for failing to change the structure of benefits packages for new state hires continues to soar and now stands at \$26 billion.

Ironically, many of those politicians who complain about my "luxury" of addressing issues are Republicans, the former party of President Ronald Reagan – a leader who chose the right path and worried about the "politics" later.

Reagan showed that good policy makes the best politics of all. When the air-traffic controllers defied federal law and went on strike, he fired them – and won re-election by a landslide. He called the Soviet Union an "Evil Empire", and then negotiated them into defeat without firing a single shot.

Yet, some still called him "naïve."

I suspect some can call me the same for hoping enough of Kentucky's political leaders stumble on some courage, are willing to "lay down on the tracks" and sacrifice re-election in order to do the right thing for the people.

If they don't, our state's growing problems will only get worse.

Jim Waters is the director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. You can reach him at jwaters@bipps.org. You can read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.