

Direct Democracy, Crouch on Obama National Public Radio (NPR) November 3, 2006 Friday

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SHOW: News & Notes 9:00 AM EST

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ANCHORS: FARAI CHIDEYA

LENGTH: 2303 words

FARAI CHIDEYA, host:

And now we move on to our regular Roundtable discussion. We'll discuss also why Stanley Crouch thinks Barack Obama is not black like him.

So joining us today from NPR headquarters in D.C., Joe Davidson, editor at The Washington Post, and Mary Frances Berry, professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania. We've also got Nat Irvin, president of Future Focus 2020, who teaches at the Babcock Graduate School of Management of Wake Forest University. He is at member station WFDD in Winston Salem, North Carolina.

So thanks for joining us, and let's talk briefly about direct democracy. You know, we've got ballot initiatives. One of them, in some states only, one of them ended a higher-ed affirmative action in California. Now there's a similar initiative on the ballot Tuesday in Michigan.

And in places like California there are so many initiatives on things like eminent domain, which we covered recently, that it's hard to keep track. So, Professor Berry, you know, do we think direct democracy could be a cure or could it be a problem?

Professor MARY FRANCES BERRY (Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania): It's not going to happen. That's the first thing. So we are talking about, you know, something that isn't going to happen. We're going to keep the system that we've got. We have to change the Constitution, and that's not going to happen. I don't even want a constitutional convention. Who knows what would happen.

And also you asked all the right questions, I mean and the responses to some of these referenda don't give me any confidence that people would be any more informed than they are right now about the issues. So one, it's not going to happen. And two, it might be okay. But then in the Federalist Papers there is all this discussion about whether we should have a direct democracy or a republic.

And the endgame is that given the diversity, the variety, the geographic extent of the country, even then - and it's much greater now - that a republican government was the best way to go. So it's not going to happen.

CHIDEYA: Nat, do you - I mean regardless of whether or not you think it's going to happen in the near future, do you think that a republic is the best way to serve America? Because I mean various people, all sorts of political stripes have complained about things like gerrymandering that give certain groups an advantage over others. Should we just all go to the polls and say war in Iraq? Check or not check, you know. Education? Check.

Professor NAT IRVIN (Babcock School of Management, Wake Forest University): Well, I think, you know, I agree with Mary. I think what happens is that in our democracy, republican form of democracy, actually it's quite flexible. When you look at this year's election, November 7, there are 200 statewide ballot measures. And you listed some of the issues that people are dealing with. I think our system is fairly flexible.

The challenge that we face with if we were to have too many of these initiatives, which is why I'm concerned about it, is that basically people just don't know what they are voting for. I mean here in North Carolina we elect judges. But even the most astute observers of the political process, people who keep up with the issues, don't know what the judges stand for.

You basically you have no idea who you're voting for. You're voting for a person who says he is a Democratic judge or a Republican judge and he gives you this little spiel, but you don't really know what the judge is about. And so when you talk about issues of trying to actually decide, for example, when you limit - some ballot initiatives this year will limit the number of the percentage of money that can be spent on instructional classroom in - the classroom instruction, to 65 percent.

How do you know whether that's a good idea? And what happens is the people that have the most money will sway public opinion, and I think that's one of those downsides of having a direct democracy.

CHIDEYA: Joe?

Mr. JOE DAVIDSON (Editor, The Washington post): Well, I think the clearest example of where this country could have a direct democracy is in the election of the presidency. I was surprised after the - after George Bush won, was - won the Electoral College, I should say, the first time, that the Democrats did not make a big stink about the Electoral College. Because clearly you have a situation here where it's not even a representative democracy.

Most of the people in the country did not vote for George Bush. They voted for his opponent. Nonetheless, he was elected by the Electoral College and not by a popular vote. And so - but the response to the Electoral College after that was fairly tame. There was no outcry, really, that it be changed by the Democratic Party, and certainly not the Republican Party. And so it seems as if this country, certainly the political parties, are basically comfortable with that form of democracy, if that's in fact what it is.

CHIDEYA: I think we need to come back to the Electoral College and do a longer exploration. But they've - we've got some news that's just sort of coming up today, which is that the Reverend Ted Haggard resigned as president of the National Association of Evangelicals yesterday. He's married, a father of five. He is allegedly someone who has been soliciting both gay sex and methamphetamine from the guy that he paid for sex.

And so when church leaders speak out on political topics, do their misdeeds resonate in both politics and religion? I'm just thinking here of how - from the earlier part of our show today, Bishop John Gimenez was saying, you know, there needs to be a Christian political party. There needs to be a focus on gay marriage. But, you know, when you blend the two, if someone has a misdeed, it can really ricochet. And so, you know, Joe, what do you think about that?

Mr. DAVIDSON: Well, I think that in this particular case, I don't think it's going to have a great deal of ramifications nationally. I think in Colorado it may, where you have this ballot measure regarding marriage for - for same-sex marriage. And because he's prominent, particularly in Colorado, I think kind of long-term or nationwide ramifications, my guess is that there won't be much in that area.

For one, a lot of people don't - I mean for one reason there's a lot of people who don't go to the polls based on what a minister many miles away from them has to say. Even if this is a - even if he's a minister of a megachurch, even if he's on national television, I don't think a lot of people base their voting decisions on what that particular person says. And if that person falls, shall we say, because of allegations, I don't think that would necessarily change any votes either.

Prof. BERRY: Farai, I think that if the evangelicals and the other Christian conservatives had not eroded the barrier between the separation of church and state and been all involved in these political activities like the bishops who are on the earlier interview, no one would care except those who, you know, care about what kind of sex people have, about what Reverend Haggard did. And he could be a sinner within the church, they could go do whatever they want to do about it.

But the fact that they have now just said that they want to run willy-nilly over that barrier and all involved in political things, and trying to get even more deeply involved in them. It - and then, the hypocrisy of it is what makes you call attention to it. And so that's why they're getting hoist by their own (unintelligible), so to speak.

CHIDEYA: Nat, you know, what's the danger? I mean is this going to produce echoes of - it's a different situation from Foley, but it's another, you know, since this minister in Colorado Springs was a big GOP supporter, is it going to ricochet on the party?

Prof. IRVIN: Oh, I doubt it. I think what it illustrates more than anything is the common humanity that we all share. I think it, you know, it reminds me of the thing that you say you hate the most is probably the thing that's in you. And this country still, you know, we talk about it often on this show, the issues of gay marriage, how we're going to deal with the identity of the gay community within the country.

And when you see a man like this, or the former governor of New Jersey and others who have had to struggle with their own sexual identity, what it probably does is that it will help this country to some extent to say, wait a minute, maybe we need to take a greater look, a more deeper look at how we look at sexual identity, how we look at these matters of gay marriage. Is it something as simple as just putting I'm opposed to gay marriage on a ballot, you know, on a ballot initiative, as we were talking earlier.

It's not, and it's too bad for this minister and his family for what he's going to have to go through with. I'm sympathetic with him. I'm sympathetic with everybody who deals with a complex issue like this and then it becomes public.

CHIDEYA: Well, speaking of complex issues and being public around Christianity, religion, government, the U.S. Military is kind of caught up in tensions between evangelicals who say we have the right to preach the message of God, and people who say we don't want to hear it. So there's like this lawsuit that was actually tossed out by Michael Weinstein and other ex-cadets at the Air Force Academy who said that a military chaplain violated their religious freedom by urging the cadets to attend Christian services or face being burned in the fires of hell.

And then on the other side, people who feel punished for praying out loud. So when it comes to this public space of political discourse and, you know, in this case, the military, how are people supposed to present themselves to the world? I mean if you have a deeply felt belief, should you be able to express it and where does your belief end at someone else's door?

Prof. BERRY: You can't, you can't. Because it's much like the story about the Muslim taxi drivers who wanted to be taxi drivers at the airport but they didn't want to carry people who had alcohol because it was against their faith. And they were engaged, they didn't have to drive taxis at the airport. They had it, and they had a monopoly of it, and they were supposed to be serving the public.

Here we have the military, which has people of all faiths in it and people of no faith in it, and which is a government institution funded by taxpayers; and here because I as a Baptist feel that I should go out and proselytize or chaplain, that is we should go and insist that everybody else profess Christianity or tell them what they must do and have no respect at all for their religion. It is starting from the top. This climate has worsened in the last few years in this country of talking about matters of faith, which should be kept separate.

And now you have people insisting and running roughshod over other people's faiths. It's time to get, you know, religion out of the public sphere. And now we have more and more and more of it, and it's going to create more disunity in the military. And in the military, we need people to come together to work in the national defense and not to be divided over matters of faith and showing disrespect at funerals for people who are from different faith and all the rest of it.

CHIDEYA: I have to move on because we don't have much time. Joe and Nat, very quickly. What I would ask you is some people, you know, on a different context say, well, we need prayer back in the schools, you know. Is there ever a legitimate purpose for using religion in the public sphere? And, Joe, I'm going to talk to you first.

Mr. DAVIDSON: Well certainly in the military there is ample opportunity to express your faith. There are chaplains of all faiths in the military. They are officers in the military. So I think that the military certainly recognizes the need or the desire for there to be an opportunity for people to express their faith. It just should not be forced upon them in any way, and I think that's the crucial issue.

CHIDEYA: Nat.

Prof. IRVIN: Well, my answer is this that - you know, **Diana Eck**, who's written a new book - she's a Harvard Professor - called *A New Religious* - I think it's *A New Religious America*, and it says basically that we are the most religiously diverse nation in the world. And the struggle that the military has right now - and I think that they've just about got it right, which is to try to find that balance - is what we're going to all have to deal with.

We have more - soon to be more Muslims than we have Jews in this country, already more Muslims than Episcopalians. And when you just look at all the diversity that is happening not just in terms of the, you know - actually the face of America, but the faith of America. It's a matter of just trying to find the balance. And I think the military just about got it right. You know when you got the uniform on, hey, you're a government officer and you can't proselytize. That's a reasonable expectation, it seems to me.

CHIDEYA: All right, we've got Nat Irvin of *Future Focus 2020*, Mary Frances Berry of the University of Pennsylvania, Joe Davidson of *The Washington Post*. Thank you all.

Mr. DAVIDSON: Thank you.

Prof. BERRY: Thank you.

Prof. IRVIN: Thank you.

CHIDEYA: So, as always, if you'd like to comment on any of the topics you've heard on the Roundtable, you can call us at 202-408-3330. 202-408-3330. Or send an email. Just log on to npr.org and click on Contact Us. Be sure to tell us where you're writing from and how to pronounce your name.

Next on NEWS & NOTES, we tackle some of the biggest stories this week in sports. Plus, Latino rapper Pitbull blend politics and rhymes on his new album, El Mariel.

(Soundbite of music)

CHIDEYA: You're listening to NEWS & NOTES from NPR News.

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