

The Michigan Daily



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FROM THE DAILY

System of a down

Polarized politics limit democratic process

The 2012 election is a time of big money and small sound bites – two parties and a single choice. Though our world is growing ever more complex, the way we think and talk in public arena is increasingly crass and simple. Nuance has been replaced by talking points, subtlety by catchphrases. Our democracy is broken. It has been broken by a system of polarizing campaigns from two major parties satisfied with winning elections rather than pushing our nation forward.

Historically, candidates have had two main routes to successfully win an election: money and incumbency. Over the last decade, more than 80 percent of Senate races and more than 90 percent of House seats were won by the candidate who spent the most money campaigning, according to website Opensecrets.org. Combined with the fact that in 50 years, the re-election rate for the House has yet to dip below 85 percent for an election cycle and the average rate for Senate during the same period exceeds 80 percent, one can understand it's difficult to hear for new voices and new ideas to be heard.

It's a self-sustaining cycle in which candidates get themselves elected with expensive initial campaigns, fueling re-elections with incumbency and money from larger donors interested in investing in the winningest candidates, to advocate their interests. More money is being spent to see the same people do the same things over and over.

Neither of the two major parties have a significant problem with this current situation, as it benefits each. As a result of only addressing one another in debates, speeches and platforms, the two parties marginalize third parties, further increasing their own odds of winning. From a candidate's perspective it's better to share 50/50 odds with

a single opponent than admit there may be more than two choices. Dividing issues into two answers forces the public to take one of two sides – us against them – which only propagates further divisions. Our parties have become the teams we root for, rather than the ideals to which we aspire.

There's no conspiracy forcing our system to be this way. It's the stability of the lowest common denominator. Candidates want the populace to believe there are only two choices.

It's a cycle that needs to change, because if politicians can get us talking about only two strict platforms, they do so at the expense of all the other issues we face. This explains why every major campaign is content to focus merely on the topic of the day in a series of pivot-point discussion. Big Bird and empty chairs shouldn't even matter in a world of endless wars and indefinite detention, of Arab Springs and falling dictators. In a world where rights are limited by sexual orientation and pay is discriminated by gender, we need more than tired, dueling slogans. We need a system that encourages input from a greater variety of sources. Disagreeing with both major candidates is a legitimate position to hold and it is about time we respected that.

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