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Tis the season of empty promises

By Roger Kolb
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With the election coming up, the usual talk has been flying around about all the seemingly sane and able-bodied people out there who never vote. Disinterest in politics, I suspect, is the main reason, though I can't help speculating that many stay home because they are disgusted by all of recent history's unfulfilled campaign promises. What is the point of voting, they wonder, when the winner plans to renege in February on all the campaign promises he made in October? Clinton promised a middle-class tax cut, Bush Sr. no new taxes, Nixon a secret plan to get out of Vietnam, etc. Most of our presidents would seem a lot less principled and worthy of marble statuary if we were to compare what they did in office against their campaign promises.

By no means is the nonvoter the only one who can be disgusted by the broken campaign promise. So can a member of a party. Campaign workers join a political party not to have an excuse to get out of the house, but because they believe in specific public policies. Why should they bust their butts to elect someone when, after the election, he talks and votes like a member of the opposition?

The state that is most susceptible to this regrettable practice is the one such as Massachusetts or Kansas that favors one political party over another heavily. When the private Massachusetts citizen, considering a run for office, observes that the overwhelming preponderance of elected officials are Democrats, he may declare himself a Democrat, too, just to get elected, though he may think like a Republican.

Something in this paper the other day caught my eye. By the Massachusetts Democratic Party, the Progressive Democrats of Somerville, unlike similar party factions around the state, have been stripped of the right to use the word "Democrats." They may call themselves, "The Progressives of Somerville," but not the "Progressive Democrats of Somerville." One of Somerville's Progressive leaders, Rebekah Gewirtz of Hall Avenue, says that her 120- to 150-member group hasn't been told why it's been singled out, but she can guess.

The Massachusetts Democratic Party, she explains, has a platform that is amended or at least re-examined every time the party holds an issues convention, as it did last year. From it, the voter can learn where the party stands on the whole ball of wax - education, the environment, abortion and the rest. The Progressive Democrats of Somerville, unlike ideologically like-minded party organizations such as Mass Democratic Future and Progressive Democrats of Massachusetts, she continues, maintains a Web site (www.massscorecard.org) on which it keeps track of the votes on issues important to Democrats cast by both parties' elected officials on Beacon Hill, and on which it opines whether each of these votes is consistent with the relevant plank in the Democratic Party's platform. This she and her fellow Somerville Progressives call "The Mass Scorecard," and it is this, she believes, that has aroused the ire of the state Democratic Party. She thinks the state's Democratic leadership feels that Democrats should have more flexibility in voting because what is popular for a Democrat from Somerville to vote for may cause a big problem for someone from bucolic Lenox or immigrant-heavy Lawrence.

Be that as it may, Gewirtz is right when she says, as she does, that the "scorecard" makes easily accessible a lot of information about local government that is both hard to find and valuable. Unless you feel inclined to go through the last two years of your local paper - and even doing that might not prove particularly helpful - it's hard to figure out, in a manner of speaking, who your state representative is, how he voted and why. I find the Mass Scorecard valuable, and I wish there were something like it coming from the other political parties. Even if there were, many critical gaps in information would remain. To close them, I believe that every legislative official, state and national, should be required to issue a statement of between

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50 and 750 words explaining why he voted as he did on each and every bill, and that his or her statements should be published in the local paper. And, concerning our reps on Capitol Hill specifically, I believe at least one public library in every network, such as our Minuteman Network, should subscribe to "The Congressional Record" - and at federal expense.

There are a lot of people out there who think that government is what our elected officials utter in their public speeches. I disagree. Speeches are just a lot of hot air unless the politician giving it has the courage to put his legislative or executive authority behind his expressed goals. Fact is, government is not what our leaders say but what they do, and little else is.

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