Electoral Axioms: A Psuedo-Euclidean Guide to The Perplexed

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[These jottings reflect, not expertise, but experience---over 50 years of watching and sometimes participating in politics. They do not claim to offer advice on how one should vote (though they may reflect how I might vote); instead, they provide a set of truisms to help people understand why voting, though important, usually leaves voters unsatisfied. The limitations on the ability of elections to bring about reform, may suggest that participation in civil society is equally important in driving social change.²]

Electoral Axiom No.1. In most elections, voters decide: “what kind of people do we want to be?” Should our attitude to our neighbors be that of the Good Samaritan? Or should we respond to their economic hardship with the slogan “I upped my income. Up yours!”?

Electoral Axiom No. 2. Many people hold inconsistent values. They want to be tough and wage war on those who threaten us, to be frugal and avoid debt, and to be stingy and avoid taxes to pay for those wars.

Electoral Axiom No. 3. Public policy decisions can be justified in three ways: as intrinsically good, as likely to produce intrinsically good results (what lawyers call "instrumentalism" and philosophers call "consequentialism"), or both.

Electoral Axiom No. 4. People may disagree about what is intrinsically good or about the likely consequences of a particular public policy decision. Predicting the future is tricky, even if we agree on the truth about the past. Moreover, decisions can have both good and bad consequences that need to be weighed.

Political Axiom No. 5. Scientists say there are two kinds of truth: "trivial truths" in which the opposite is clearly absurd and "important truths" in which the opposite is also true. For example, "all mammals eventually die" is a "trivial truth"; "a photon is both a particle and a wave" is an "important truth." Similarly, in politics, abortion or debt can be both good and bad.³

Corollary 5: Most disagreements among reasonable people are not about the existence of principles but about how far they should be extended without becoming

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² These remarks benefitted from comments from members of the collective that once ran the UCLAW newspaper, The Hostile Witness, particularly those of Jerry Gordon. As Jerry observed, the axioms presuppose logical decisions and ignore the intuitional and spiritual motivations that affect decisions---including how to cast a vote.

³ Compare: "A party of order and stability, and a party of progress and reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life." John Stuart Mill.
unreasonable. For example, reasonable folks can agree with the principle that expansion of government power is dangerous yet disagree about whether government ought to build levees or regulate the securities market or control the airwaves.  

Political Axiom No. 6: Do not assume that people who disagree with you are stupid or misinformed; it can lead to acts such as disqualifying them from voting, or ill-fated efforts to educate them, or blaming bad policy on the media.

Political Axiom No. 7. "Democracy" does not mean "if you get the most votes, you get to do whatever you want." Consider the many practical, legal, and institutional impediments to change; for example, bureaucratic inertia, constitutional limitations, and the filibuster.

Political Axiom No. 8. Politicians are "technicians of consent." To get something done, they have to get people who don't agree with them to go along with their proposals.

Political Axiom No. 9. Politicians cannot let the "best" be the enemy of the "better." Even an honest politician may have to vote for The Affordable Care Act as better while believing that a Canadian-style "single payer" system would be the best.

Political Axiom No. 10. There are some things only government can do. Even the most fanatical free-marketeer does not think that grocers should be allowed to sell tainted food, that anyone with a transmitter should be able to broadcast, or that the courts should not enforce contracts and punish cheaters.

Political Axiom No. 11. Because office-seekers may take positions on several different policies, only those voters who single-mindedly care about just one of them will find it easy to cast a vote.

Political Axiom No. 12. Political advertising seldom changes people’s minds. The problem with the Citizens United decision is that it legitimates bribery and leads to even more political advertising---advertising which tends to reduce political debate to childish posturing.  

4 Similarly, folks who think that women should control their own bodies will pause when they consider prostitution, surrogate motherhood, or euthanasia.

5 People dislike political ads, partly because they don’t like to hear about politicians they dislike, but even more so because the ads insult their intelligence. We have become so used to the infantile nature of normal advertising that we do not notice how it turns wants into needs; adults know that you can’t have everything you want. Political ads force people to confront the childish nature of advertising.