The Death of Party Competition
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Competition is a fundamental American value in American business. We value it not just as an abstract principle or symbol, but because we understand that it underlies economic growth and prosperity.

If someone seriously proposed ending competition in economic life, most Americans would understandably be repelled. In less politically correct times, such ideas would be labeled "Un-American" or during the cold war as "communist." But even today efforts to end competition in economic life would be met with derision and repugnance. We wouldn't tolerate it--not for a minute.

But in political life competition is rapidly disappearing; indeed, has disappeared in many jurisdictions--and our elected officials regularly exploit opportunities to limit it further--and we hear hardly a peep of protest.

The evidence that political competition is disappearing is abundant. Fewer and fewer state legislative and congressional districts feature serious competition between the Republican and Democrat parties. Either one party or the other is so dominant the other has virtually no chance to win.

Within these one party districts, incumbents today typically face little or no opposition. Once elected, they stay in office as long as they wish, and the electoral protection they have scares off serious challengers. Typically, reelection rates for both the state legislature and the state's congressional delegation push 98 percent.

Only open seat elections really matter, and many of them, because they occur in one party areas, are non competitive as well, making the first primary after an incumbent decides not to run the only relevant election. But now even that limited competition is threatened by an insidious new practice.

That practice is for legislators to resign or indicate they will not seek reelection after they have been nominated in a primary or reelected in a general election. Recently members of Congress, the state Senate and the state House have resigned in this manner.

The latest instance occurred in a suburban Harrisburg state house district centered in the Hershey area. The incumbent "Chick" Tulli is a typical Pennsylvania legislative incumbent. He represents a "safe" district, meaning the opposition party is about as likely to knock him off as Osama Bin Laden is to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

He is a respected and popular legislator who hasn't had significant opposition for years and, in fact, this year he had no opposition at all. Rival Democrats didn't even bother to nominate someone to oppose him in the fall.

Nevertheless, Tulli apparently frustrated that he has been unable to move into the ranks of his own party's leadership decided sometime this year that he didn't want to stay in the house or run in the fall for re-election.

Had he announced his intention to retire before the spring primary both his party (Republican) and the opposition party (Democrat) could have used the party primaries to select nominees who then could contest the
seat in the fall. Both party's voters would have had a chance to influence who would represent them in the state house.

But, instead, Rep. Tulli ran in the party primary (no opposition) and was re-nominated to run for his seat in the fall. Then after the primary, he announced that he would not run in the fall.

Since the primary occurred in May, party rules prevail (allowed by state law) giving the job of nominating a replacement candidate to a select group of party committee members. And since the Democrats didn't bother to nominate anyone in the primary to run against the popular Tulli, the candidate (a done deal) selected by the party committee is virtually assured of election in November.

And so the voters will have no meaningful role in selecting Tulli's replacement. And his successor will likely be able to stay in office as long as he wishes.

A second recent example of this practice occurred in one of Pennsylvania's congressional districts.

Long time incumbent and congressional power Bud Shuster resigned his 9th Congressional seat the day he took the oath of office in January 2001, producing an open seat and triggering a special election to fill out Shuster's current term.

Republican power brokers in the 9th hand picked Shuster's son to be the party nominee in this heavily Republican district--no party primary was held--virtually ensuring the younger Shuster would fill out his father's term. Subsequently as an "incumbent" he won the Republican primary to serve a full term in his own right.

Many observers believed that Shuster timed his resignation to maximize the chances that his son would succeed him. In any case, that is what happened. If the new Congressman Shuster stays in office as long as the former congressman, the voters can expect another chance around 2030 or so.

The Tulli and Shuster situations are just two examples of how meaningful competition is being eliminated in our politics. As disturbing as these two cases are, a subtler and even more insidious aspect of the drive to kill competition is found in the history of decennial reapportionments. Both parties have conspired to make more and more congressional districts "safe" for one or the other of them.

In fact, we have now reached the place in our political history where a truly competitive Congressional race (that is a race that either side could win) is so rare that often as not it is carried as a national story. In any one contemporary congressional election probably no more than 5 percent of all House seats up are really in play. The rest are either dominated by an incumbent--or are so one sided in party registration--as to remove all doubt of who will win.

This disconnect between what we expect in our economic life--and what we accept in our political life--is one of the most jarring inconsistencies in American life. If American business stifled competition the way American politicians have, there would be rioting in the streets across the country. But the collective public reaction to the ongoing strangulation of political competition seems to be a collective ho hum.
We suspect this is so because the public better understands the impact of competition in business than it does the loss of competition in politics. In business the loss of competition means fewer products and services, products and services of lower quality, and products and services that cost more. Most people understand this pretty well and few want to see it happen.

But in government and politics, the loss of competition is not so apparent, and hence not so well understood. But it is just as real. As in the private sector, the quality of the public policy we get is directly related to the competitiveness of the political system that produces it.

We tend to get lousy public policy for the same reason that customers of a monopoly tend to get lousy services. Our politicians have little incentive to make it better.

And politicians who don't have to compete also don't have to worry about their jobs. And because they don't, fewer of them are going to take on the tough issues or try to solve the really intractable problems.

How do we begin to restore competition to our politics? We don't purport to know fully the answer to that question. The problem has been growing for a very long time--and it probably is going to take a long time to fix it.

But we can begin by recognizing and acknowledging just how bad the problem has become, and the exorbitant price we are paying for it. Until we all begin to pay more attention to the loss of competition in political life, it is only going to become worse.

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