

A Fundamental Divide Underlies the Election Results

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At some point during the long debate over Florida's presidential vote, I heard an Al Gore partisan offer a splendid analogy.

He said those Florida voters whose ballots, for one reason or another, were rejected by tabulation machines are in a position similar to something we've all experienced.

We have all tried to insert a dollar bill into a vending machine, the Gore defender said, only to have the machine disgorge the bill because it is wrinkled or faded. But this doesn't change the fact that what we've tendered is a perfectly legitimate dollar bill.

The Gore backer stopped there, evidently concluding that his analogy is an unanswerable smasher, proving that no effort should be spared trying to "count" rejected ballots in Florida.

But I couldn't help thinking that this analogy needs to be followed a step or two further. It's the kind of thinking, I guess, that makes me a conservative and a Bush supporter.

It is certainly true that a vending machine's rejecting your greenback doesn't mean there is necessarily anything wrong with your dollar bill.

But it does mean you don't get your candy bar.

You are hardly justified in tearing the vending machine from the wall and opening it with a sledgehammer just because it rejected your legitimate dollar bill.

The vending company would, after all, prefer to complete the sale as much as you would. But they've learned to live with an imperfect system that sometimes rejects good currency. That's because the only realistic alternative is to leave themselves vulnerable to fraud in a world of trickery.

These different ways of looking at the same analogy nicely represent the two fundamental philosophies at war in America's election dispute. That there are fundamental philosophies involved is worth noticing.

At one level, of course, we're engaged in a simple, cynical power struggle—partisans on both sides concocting whatever arguments it takes to get their guy into the White House.

But Americans may emerge from this ordeal with a better chance of healing wounds if they try to give one another at least some benefit of the doubt. It's worth trying to believe that deeply held philosophical differences are at work in these

disagreements, rather than a mere determination to win at all costs.

What philosophical beliefs? Well, at the risk of vast oversimplification, the bedrock principle of liberalism is a belief in the perfectibility of human affairs. Liberals believe faulty social institutions cause most human problems. Muster enough intelligence and moral courage to transform social institutions, liberals argue, and all will be well.

Translating this bedrock belief into one specific social idea, liberals are inclined to suspect that sufficiently enlightened government action could design a more fair and humane economic system than can the free market—one where greed and ruthless competition would fade, wealth would be more evenly distributed, and yet prosperity would continue.

Conservatives think differently. Their bedrock belief is in a permanently limited human nature. Society's aim, they believe, must be to maintain institutions that make the best of imperfect humanity—restricting political power and giving personal incentives to help and not hurt their fellows.

In economic affairs, conservatives rely on marketplace incentives to make good use of people's inevitable self-interest, by enriching them for producing things other people need. That arrangement, conservatives argue, produces the fairest and most prosperous economy possible in an imperfect world.

Now, when these two world views collided over a majestically "imperfect," high-stakes mess—the presidential election in Florida—their reactions were perhaps predictable.

Liberals have wanted to "get it right" to "count every vote," to ensure "the will of the people" prevails. They will make no peace with imperfection. If we want the "accurate" result badly enough, they say, we will get it.

Conservatives, by contrast have been quick to accept that we can never know with certainty who "won" in Florida—the vote was too close and the counting systems are too imprecise. So they have argued that the best we can do, given this imperfect reality, is to follow the pre-existing rules to the letter, avoiding arbitrary, subjective vote counting that seeks a perfect result at the cost of a lawless process. To conservative eyes, Florida's election system has come to look a bit like a vandalized vending machine.

No doubt it can't be wholly accidental that liberals' desire to overcome imperfection in Florida, and conservatives' desire to face facts and make the best of them, also happen to be positions that favor their mutual champions.

But deep down at the bottom of this battle there is the red-hot eternal friction between modern liberals' idealism (or naïve utopianism) and conservatives' realism (or complacency).

In the end, this philosophical divide is more serious and tougher to compromise about than mere partisan power-seeking.

But it's also nobler. Ω