

Letter from Rome

The Expatriate Vote

By Ruth Ellen Gruber

In early September I had lunch with Mr. and Mrs. X, American acquaintances who live year-round in Italy. They are a well-off, well-educated couple who retired some years ago to a beautiful home in the rolling hills of Umbria. It was still two months until November, but like most Americans (and many non-Americans) I know, the upcoming Presidential election weighed heavily on my mind.

From the intensity of the political message, to the historic character of the candidates, to the sheer spectacle of it all, the contest was compelling. On the basis of my travels, I think it is safe to say that Barack Hussein Obama versus John McCain became the most mesmerizing, most publicly engaged, global drama of recent memory.

To us Americans out here on the periphery, the mechanics of actually voting represented a particularly pressing issue. The registration process; requesting an absentee ballot; fax and e-mail possibilities; the vagaries of the postal system; fears that, once filled in and mailed, one's ballot might not arrive, and if it did arrive, would not be counted—all these became fodder for

anxious questions and endless conversations.

Voting from overseas, however, is really not very difficult. Rules vary from state to state, but in general, if you live abroad you are eligible to vote in Federal elections in the last place you lived in the U.S. There are Web sites, phone lines, organizations, and even people you can meet to help fill out the forms.

Nevertheless, back in early September, "Did you get your ballot yet?" was a question that was, among my friends, constantly on the tips of our tongues. We worried that time, distance and whatever else might crop up would somehow prevent us from voting. Almost daily political e-mails warned that if we failed to register in time we might lose our chance of casting a ballot.

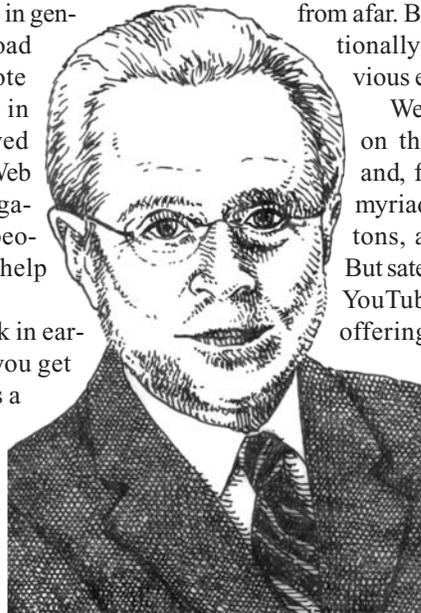
In a way, this concern was a displacement anxiety that both stemmed from and

heightened fears (on both sides) about the eventual electoral outcome. Being physically removed from the main field of combat, we followed the campaign from afar. But we were more emotionally involved than in previous electoral seasons.

We may have missed out on the razzmatazz rallies and, for the most part, the myriad ads, billboards, buttons, and bumper stickers. But satellite TV, e-mail, blogs, YouTube, and other Internet offerings brought us the big picture, plus an avalanche of the local and arcane.

Tina Fey's appearances on *Saturday Night Live*? I saw them all. *The Daily Show*? Ditto. Sarah Palin on the stump? Sure. The

debates? Of course. I woke up at 3 A.M. to watch two of them live, but I easily caught the others on replays or the Web. I



WOLF BLITZER

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also downloaded an astonishing selection of podcasts to listen to as I walked my dog down Italian dirt roads or sped in my car along motorways in Central Europe.

“I think I’m in love with Wolf Blitzer,” a friend of mine in Rome confided. She had never had much good to say about the CNN anchor, but she became addicted to his nightly campaign program as part of an interest in the election that had become an obsession.

Since voting was a priority, I did what everyone recommended and sent in my registration material early. I was taken aback, though, when my ballot arrived. It came in the official envelope, and inside there was the official printed envelope for sending it back.

But the package did not seem to include a real ballot. I simply received a flimsy photocopied form where I could write in my choice, not the normal printed list of candidates and parties. This seemed to justify all my jitters. Damn! I thought. They forgot to send me the ballot! Now what?

I phoned the electoral board in Philadelphia, where I am registered. The staffer I reached spoke bureaucratese, not English, but he managed to explain the situation. If an absentee voting request arrived before September 18, he said, “there is a law, ma’am” mandating that only a write-in ballot could be sent out.

It did not quite make sense, but I filled out the form and mailed it off.

GIVEN my preoccupations, it was natural to bring up the election during my lunch with Mr. and Mrs. X. “So,” I asked them casually as we nibbled at our postprandial biscotti, “did you get your ballots yet?”

“Oh,” they replied with sort of tut-

tutting motions of their heads. “Oh, no—we don’t vote.”

At first, I didn’t quite know how to respond. Were they kidding? Those three little words, “we don’t vote,” had removed these people from the frame of reference in which I operate.

How could anybody, I felt—let alone two educated citizens with whom I maintained cordial social relations—not want to participate in this election? Or at least feel it necessary to have some input into the game? Even if they did live overseas, how could they pass up this chance? Whatever the outcome, the election itself would be a turning point for the nation. Didn’t they want to be part of, well, history—of something historic?

We argued, of course. And the argument skirted the edge of the unpleasant.

Their votes were meaningless in the voting district where they would be cast, the Xs told me, because there was a perennial one-sided outcome, not to mention a record of corruption. Plus, they hinted enigmatically, there were “other reasons” not to vote.

Losing my composure a little, I talked about my experiences living in totalitarian countries where free ballots were

a farce. I made some crack about how everyone’s vote counted, regardless of social or economic standing. And I pronounced something I truly believe—that if you don’t vote, you don’t have the right to complain about what happens after the ballots are in.

Then, at the risk of sounding like a high school civics teacher, I boiled over when Mr. X, knowing where my own political preferences lay, told me that even if he did vote, he would probably “shock” me and vote for John McCain.

“I don’t care whom you vote for,” I told him. “What’s important is to take part in the process.”

I’ve had these discussions before with expatriate Americans, and they have sometimes resulted in rifts in once solid friendships.

I’m aware that the electoral system is far from perfect; that democracy is frequently flawed. And yes, that votes can get lost or bought or worse. Suffrage can be, and has been, denied. Still, I can’t see why one should not cast a ballot where it is available. If you don’t like the candidates, write someone in.

Eight years ago, during the 2000 Presidential election, I had this conversation

OFFICIAL FEDERAL WRITE-IN ABSENTEE BALLOT	
PRESIDENT/VICE PRESIDENT	
U.S. SENATOR*	
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE/DELEGATE**/RESIDENT COMMISSIONER**	
<small>* Legal residents of the District of Columbia may vote only for President/Vice President and Delegate. ** Legal residents of American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands may vote only for Delegate or Resident Commissioner to the Congress.</small>	
ADDENDUM	
<small>Some states allow the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot to be used by military and overseas civilian voters in elections other than general elections or for offices other than Federal offices. Consult your state section in the Voting Assistance Guide to determine your state's policy. If you are eligible to use this ballot to vote for offices/candidates other than those listed above, please indicate in the spaces provided below, the office for which you wish to vote (for example: Governor, Attorney General, Mayor, State Senator, etc.), and the name and/or party affiliation of the candidate for whom you wish to vote.</small>	
OFFICE	CANDIDATE NAME or PARTY AFFILIATION
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

with a friend who at the time was 50 years old and had never voted in his life. When I found this out I was aghast—particularly since his voting district was in Florida. He ended up registering and voting for Al Gore.

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am to you for making sure that I got an absentee ballot and voted,” he told me later, as the Florida recount got under way.

“I never would have guessed that Florida would even have relevance in this election, much less that everyone else in the world would be wondering about the absentee ballots there,” he said.

The experience, he told me, had taught him a lesson: “No one will ever tell me again that our votes don’t count. I will certainly vote in future elections, too.”

I have lost touch with this friend, so I don’t know if he kept his pledge.

In any event, not long after our lunch, Mr. X sent me an e-mail justifying his choice to abstain. His tone was rather condescending, to put it mildly. This is what he wrote:

“First, your view that I have to vote because people in North Korea would love to be able to vote, reminds me of my mother’s old saying that I had to eat my breakfast because people in China are starving. People in China would still be starving whether or not I ate my breakfast. My gobbling down Wheaties is totally independent of their starvation. I can’t help them. If I’m not hungry, I have the full right not to eat the Wheaties in the same way I could pass up more of the risotto yesterday notwithstanding hunger in the Third World.

“Second, I was reminded of a saying many years ago by William F. Buckley Jr., who I am sure is one of your intellectual heroes. Said Buckley: ‘They told me that if I voted for Goldwater we would soon have 500,000 troops in Vietnam and still be losing the war. How right they were! I voted for Goldwater and sure enough we have 500,000 troops in Vietnam and we are losing the war.’ Perhaps the vote is not everything.”

I didn’t reply. I even forbore sending him the article a few weeks later in which

Buckley’s son Christopher said, “Sorry, Dad,” and endorsed Obama.

Of course, the vote itself is not “everything.” Who knows, maybe Mr. X, who no doubt has supported civic and charitable causes, prefers simply giving financial backing to a political favorite.

In an election, though, it is still the vote that counts—and is counted. This election, as we are all aware, more than 126 million Americans recognized this reality.

Like Mr. X, when I refused to eat something as a child I was told to think of the starving children—but in our family the country cited was India. Sometimes I was told to eat “one spoonful for Aunt Dorothy, one for Uncle Art, one for Aunt Alice,” etc.

The spoonfuls for my relatives, like the appeal to think of the starving in a distant place, naturally were not to be taken literally, nor even as a five-year-old did I do so. They were, however, ways to get a small child to think symbolically. They showed that what I myself was doing—sitting at home and eating—was somehow connected to a wider world.

That’s a lesson many Americans cannot seem to appreciate.

I’M WRITING this “letter” two weeks after the Presidential election. It is more than two months after the lunch I had with Mr. and Mrs. X in Italy—and another two months before the inauguration of Barack Obama as our 44th President.

As readers of these pages know, I have never subscribed to the notion that Europeans have become overwhelmingly anti-American in the last few years, or at least more virulently anti-American than in the past.

Virulently anti-President George W. Bush and anti-U.S. policy, yes. And yes, some narrow-minded folks, as so often before, confound the Bush Administration with every individual American they meet.

Basically, I found that most Europeans I tended to speak with in recent years sounded, in their criticism of Bush, of America, of “things American,” like

Democrats. Or, of late, like the disillusioned Republicans whose increasingly sour view has sent President Bush’s approval rating plunging.

“I feel I was cheated,” a Czech acquaintance of mine, the banjo player in a bluegrass band, said last year, talking about the Iraq War. He had supported the war and talked it up to his circle of friends. “They cheated us all,” he complained.

On Election Day, I was in Lviv, winding up a weeklong trip to western Ukraine. Taking me to the airport, my taxi driver saluted me with the Ukrainian equivalent of “Go, Obama!”

I flew back to Rome, arriving just in time to stay up all night and watch the election returns with my friend who declared herself in love with Wolf Blitzer. We have known each other for a long time. Both of us left the U.S. for Europe as students and belong to the Vietnam-era generation of expatriates who vowed never to move back while Richard M. Nixon was President.

She and her husband and I had also watched the returns together 20 years ago, when George H.W. Bush crushed Michael Dukakis. I remember how we sat dejected, our eyes swollen, as dawn began to break. This year we wept too.

Over the course of the next few days, I received moving e-mails and text messages from friends in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic—countries struggling with their own political demons as they adapt to democratic systems. They congratulated me, but they also more broadly congratulated my country.

“Yours is a great nation,” a friend from Hungary texted.

A friend in Warsaw wrote: “America is an amazing example for so many people around the world (and I hope for some Poles, too). I must say it is very exciting!”

Indeed. After all, history has been made. Correction: We made history. But I haven’t heard from Mr. and Mrs. X.

P.S. The Web site artdaily.org posted a page featuring 300 newspaper front pages from the U.S. and around the world announcing Obama’s victory. It’s powerful viewing.