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Voters should take more responsibility for election outcomes

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By Patriot-News Op-Ed

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BY GORDON TOMB

A ray of hope in the municipal despair that is Harrisburg beamed recently with little notice as protesters calling for Mayor Linda Thompson's resignation canceled a rally because of bad weather. As my mother would have said, "At least they knew enough to get in out of the rain."

This is the most common sense I've seen displayed by the city's citizens. What's the point of getting wet only to state the obvious?



Mayor Linda Thompson. JENNY KANE, The Patriot-News

But the electorate has a long road to redemption. Voters ultimately are the ones to be castigated for electing Thompson, who fails to lead, and previously for repeatedly re-electing her predecessor, Stephen Reed, as he engaged in faux entrepreneurship (risking public money while pretending to be a businessman) to finance museums in the name of making Harrisburg a "destination" city.

Destination city? More like destitute city.

But rail no more at the mayors. Consider instead the voters' role. Alexis de Tocqueville's supreme understatement was perhaps that "universal suffrage is by no means a guarantee of the wisdom of the popular choice."

"Long and patient observation and much acquired knowledge are requisite to form a just estimate of the character of a single individual," Tocqueville said in commenting on the difficulty of choosing quality leaders.

"Men of the greatest genius often fail to do it, and can it be supposed that the common people will always succeed? The people have neither the time nor the means for an investigation of this kind.

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Their conclusions are hastily formed from a superficial inspection of the more prominent features of a question. Hence it often happens that mountebanks of all sorts are able to please the people, while their truest friends frequently fail to gain their confidence."

When you hear mountebanks, think officeholders who've been impeached, indicted, convicted, expelled, disgraced, shamed — or who should be. This argues for voter qualifications that are more than being 18 and breathing. How about having a lucid thought?

In the early 19th century, when Tocqueville toured the U.S. as a French bureaucrat, some states required voters to own property or earn a minimal income. Sounds good to me. Property or a job invests one in the health of the community in a particular way. But honestly, I'd settle for a little clear thinking.

Many are quick to focus on voters' rights. I'd like more voter responsibility. The question of responsibility was raised in a Cato Institute analysis following the voting debacle in Florida that delayed the culmination of the 2000 presidential election:

"Americans should protect their legal right to vote," Cato began. "At the same time, fair and informed elections require citizens to meet minimal obligations, including gaining knowledge about the choices offered and how to vote. A constitutional republic assumes that its citizens are capable of contributing to collective choices and of assuming certain minimal obligations related to voting."

Groups are elevating the civic intelligence with programs on the American Constitution, among them the Constitutional Organization of Liberty at Lebanon and the Dayspring Christian Academy at Mountville.

The 5-year-old Lebanon group has had 70 graduates of its six-week course elected to office, including two to the state Legislature. It's presented programs in Lebanon, Harrisburg, Lancaster, York, Bradford, Pittsburgh and Schuylkill counties.

"We'll go anywhere we're invited," said Laurel Petolicchio, COL's immediate past chairman. "We are educating people about the electoral process and the foundations of this country because if you don't have a firm foundation you'll go any direction the wind blows."

Some wind. At this juncture, it looks like the city's been knocked off an intellectual foundation of sand by a hurricane.

Of all the things that should be done for Harrisburg, a state bailout suggested by some commentators is not one of them. That would be an unfortunate absolution of the citizenry's responsibility. The electorate created the mess, and it needs to devise a way out of it as others allow the necessary leadership to emerge.

Tocqueville found the quality of American statesmen 50 years after the American Revolution to be significantly less than that of the country's founders — a diminution of leadership that he thought natural to the contrasting circumstances of the times.

"When serious dangers threaten the state, the people frequently succeed in selecting the citizens who are the most able to save it," said Tocqueville, possibly the wisest reporter on American politics.

May getting in out of the rain be a precursor to wiser leadership.

Gordon Tomb writes from New Cumberland. gwtomb@gmail.com.

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spoofonyou

March 09, 2011 at 10:04AM

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Here Here ! Amen ! Bravo ! It's about time that taking responsibility for ones vote and by extension ones government's direction be insisted upon rather than the usual whining. There may be hope for the burg if it's citizens would take this line of reasoning to heart and act upon it.

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bonehead85

March 09, 2011 at 10:44AM

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Amen. A vote for breathing; another for paying taxes and having skin in the game.

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The Jack

March 09, 2011 at 9:26PM

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The voters of Harrisburg also elected a convicted Crack Dealer as Constable. Fortunately the Courts decided they couldn't do that and just removed him from office.

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March 09, 2011 at 9:27PM

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