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Reaffirming Democracy, Here and Now

YOU don't get many chances in this life to make a sad reality of a laugh line. But come Tuesday, barring intervention by God or the governor, some New Yorkers will be able to say that this was the election when they got to vote early and vote often.

We're talking about those of us who made it to the polls on Sept. 11 before the terrorist attacks collapsed not only the World Trade Center but also New York's mayoral primary. On Tuesday, we get to do it over again, but with a big difference.

This time, we will not just decide who our next municipal leaders may be. This time, if we have the strength to turn out in large numbers, we will stand up for our democracy, using our most potent weapon, the ballot, to show the terrorists that they cannot defeat us.

Sounds hopelessly cornball?

You bet. But a touch of cornball may be in order, given the slender faith that some New Yorkers are showing in our collective resolve and in the democratic systems that have sustained us for 225 years.

An argument being urgently made in some newspaper columns and editorials is that New York cannot afford an election right now. We are too much in shock, it is said. We need, or so the argument goes, to suspend all balloting, to nullify the term limits overwhelmingly approved by the voters and to keep the valiant Rudolph W. Giuliani as mayor for as long as it takes to begin rebuilding New York.

Those appeals are no doubt made out of love for this city and admiration for the mayor, who has indeed been a titan in this crisis. But make no mistake. The appeals are also made out of fear and, quite possibly, a lack of faith in ourselves.

Frankly, my own reaction last week was no different. That was going to be the core of a column the day after the attack on the twin towers. It seemed to make sense to suspend the election and do everything possible to extend Mr. Giuliani's term. That was before I spoke to the ever-sensible Frederick A. O. Schwarz Jr., who was chairman of the commission that revised the City Charter in 1989.

"If you take our national history," Mr. Schwarz said, "you'll see that having the regularity of elections has been really important. The best example is 1864. Lincoln was running a war against, essentially, domestic terror. There was some chatter then about not having an election. But Lincoln gave eloquent reasons for why that should not be done."

What Lincoln said, as the Civil War raged, was this: "If the rebellion could force us to forgo, or postpone, a national election, it might fairly claim to have already conquered us."

BACK to Mr. Schwarz. "If the case for suspending elections wasn't good enough for the country in 1864," he said, "it is certainly not good enough for New York City in 2001."

It has been said, correctly, that New Yorkers' minds are not on the elections and that the turnout is likely to be low. But an unpleasant reality is that New Yorkers have never needed much of an excuse to stay away from the polls. Turnouts in school board elections range around 5 percent, and that's with nothing less than our children's future on the line.

It has been said, also correctly, that the strain on election workers will be great. Greater than the strain on rescue workers? So the Board of Elections has to work extra hard. This is a crisis.

And if we do postpone the election, for how long? Six months? A year? Until the foundation is laid for a new World Trade Center? Until the topping-off ceremony? Can anyone guarantee that in the interim, the terrorists will not strike again, or that America will not find itself in a real war, with an unbearable number of casualties? Do we keep saying, indefinitely, that Lincoln was wrong and we cannot be bothered with elections?

As for term limits, never favored in this corner, voters seem firmly committed to them. A new poll by the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion shows that while they adore Mr. Giuliani now, New Yorkers strongly insist on sticking to the rules that they voted for twice.

"Anything that resembles upheaval is not going to work," said Lee M. Miringoff, the institute's director.

Our leaders, including Mr. Giuliani, have told us that it is virtually an act of patriotism to support New York by living normal lives — by dining in restaurants and taking in plays and going to ballgames. Should we do all that to show our contempt for the emissaries of darkness, and yet call off an election, democracy's most normal, not to mention important, activity?

"It's giving in to the terrorists," said Gene Russianoff, a senior lawyer for the New York Public Interest Research Group. His advice: "Put up the American flag. Light candles. Hug your loved ones. And vote."

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