



The Advantages of Picking Low-Hanging Political Fruit

Patrick Theros

Winner-take-all (WTA) sounds like a grand idea. Greeks, Cypriots, and Greek Americans too often opt for WTA and pass up the opportunity to advance their needs by harvesting the low-hanging political fruit. Unfortunately, winner-take-all has a corollary: loser-lose-all. As a concept (WTA) has a further flaw: insisting on an all-or-nothing approach leads to stalemate, which again means that those who insist on WTA get nothing. Worse, insisting on WTA enables your opponent to chip away at the low-hanging fruit that you are trying to protect. WTA has its roots in deep insecurity and self-doubt; this self-doubt convinces politicians that they will never be as good as their opponents in negotiations. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini when asked about compromise to bring his nation's eight year's bloody war with Iraq to an end allegedly responded, "God punishes compromise." Presumably the revered cleric believed that God preferred carnage, the slaughter of teen-age soldiers running across Iraqi minefield, and the horrid burns of poison gas to compromise. His opponent in that war, Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein, reacted less dogmatically: he merely shot a minister who advocated compromise in front of a horrified cabinet meeting.

Staying in the Iraqi context, President George H. W. Bush clearly did not believe in WTA. He not only organized a world-wide alliance to undo Saddam's occupation of Kuwait, but having accomplished that with minimal American casualties (accidents and friendly fire killed more GI's than did Iraqi weapons), he stopped short of marching on Baghdad on the not unreasonable grounds that (a) he had accomplished the objective for which he had organized the alliance and (b) he saw no reason to kill more Americans. His son, who surrounded himself with WTA fanatics, saw his father's work as imperfect. He invaded and occupied Iraq, destroyed its power structure, killed twenty times as many Americans and God knows how many more Iraqis, destroyed

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Iraq's centrist governing class, and upended, to our detriment, the regional balance of power that had served us so well for more than fifty years.

Modern Greeks seem to have their political DNA wired into the same phenomenon. The syndrome affects not only the Greek state and governing class but also the politically inclined members of the Greek-American community. We see this in a Greek electoral system designed to defy both gravity and the will of the people to ensure that power concentrates in the hands of one man. The abolition of the monarchy and the emasculation of the authority of the President of the Republic ensured that no power could check the excesses of a governing party. The two leading political parties collaborated not only in that travesty of logic but further developed a bizarre electoral system guaranteed to ensure one-party majorities. We should note a few tidbits of lunacy in the system. The electoral system allocates 50 seats in Parliament—17% of the total membership—to the political party that gains a plurality even if the plurality is less than 17%. The same system decrees that if a political party gains an absolute majority in an electoral district but fails to gain 4% of votes nationally, the system nullifies the choice of the voters and gives the district to the loser. The law also ensures that the head of the political party has full control over the electoral list, which, in turn, ensures that the members in parliament reelect him over and over again. Coalition government has failed consistently in Greece because its politicians are hardwired to reject the concept as political suicide.

Greek Orthodox parishes in America embody much of the same philosophy. In my own parish, the assembly of parishioners, each of who has twenty votes, elects a parish council of twenty members at large. Under these rules, a minority faction voting in lockstep has always controlled the majority of the parish council. The bylaws of the Archdiocese reinforce this principle, although more wisely than in Greece, by setting the parish priest in opposition to the parish council. As a natural consequence, both in Greece and among Greek-American institutions, such systems perpetuate generations-long continuation of leadership that no matter how smart and talented has no incentive to think beyond the box. In fact, they devote their efforts purely to staying power. Oddly, those Greek-American organizations outside the Church that have adopted more American-style electoral systems still tend to reelect officers from the same factions. An analysis of this phenomenon requires more lines of print than available herein.

In recent years, the larger American political system has demonstrated a disturbing tendency to take on Greek norms. Gerrymandering of electoral districts, with the technology now available, has achieved a specificity that would have delighted the 1812 Governor of Massachusetts whose redistricting efforts gave birth to the term.

Congressional Quarterly listed 359 Congressional districts out of the 435 as "safe." In other words, one of our two political parties, and not the voters, determines who wins. Thanks to the fact that a very large number of members of Congress, predominantly but not exclusively Republican, risk suffering electoral defeat if they compromise in America's national interest, could well put us into a Depression rivaling that of 1929. In short, the system punishes anyone who thinks, and, instead, creates loyalties to a political philosophy akin to those for a sports team. In other words, Mitt Romney did not err by stating that a continuation of present policies could make us into Greece; he simply did not understand that the policies he espoused were already converting the U.S. political system into a parody of the one that has governed Greece for so long.

This mindset, rooted in insecurity and fear of political initiative, has paralyzed both Greek and Greek-American leadership policy making on the most important national issues of the last half-century. British official records memorialized now in a couple of recent histories of the war for Cypriot self-determination show an almost pathetic desire by both the Greek government in Athens and the late Archbishop Makarios to let London and Ankara provide a solution. That the fighting continued as long as it did reflected popular determination on the mainland and in Cyprus to continue the fight, rather than leadership decisions. In the end, Makarios eagerly grasped the 1960 agreements that had been cooked up by the British government and embraced by the Turks. Almost all outside observers and many Cypriots understood that the provisions giving Turkey—through its puppets in the Turkish Cypriot community—a veto over all Cypriot government actions would sooner, rather than later, lead to disaster.

When the disaster did come in 1974, popular outrage drove the reaction. Characteristically, Archbishop Iakovos in New York tried to avoid getting involved. Popular organizations, especially AHEPA, led the battle that resulted in Congress imposing a painful arms transfer embargo on Turkey and sustained it despite the fierce opposition of the Kissinger State Department. Other laymen such as Gene Rossides and Andy Manatos joined the fray and did marvelous work keeping up the pressure. Although the Archbishop, who had until then sold himself as the *ethnarch*, finally declared himself a participant, history records that he kept the organized Church a marginal player. Unfortunately, the Greek-American leadership allowed itself to be bamboozled—no other word better describes the case—by President Carter's promise to solve the Cyprus problem within a year if the community allowed the embargo to be lifted. Despite serious dissension within the leadership, the leadership finally acquiesced and in 1978 allowed Congress to lift the embargo. Carter pocketed his accomplishment and went on to drop the subject. With the embargo gone, the leverage it gave went as well.

Since 1978 the Greek-American community has tried to regain the upper hand. For a time, it did reasonably well with actions such as insisting that Congress sustain a 7:10 ratio in military assistance to Greece and Turkey. Given the circumstances, the community leadership did well in going after a doable target; it cost the Congress little and White House protestations that Turkey was “offended” at the linkage gained little traction. The 7:10 ratio battle represents perhaps the best case of “pushing against an open door.” Unfortunately, the issue went away because foreign aid became of increasingly less importance to both countries, especially once Greece joined the EU.

Since then the Greek-American leadership has settled into a war of attrition: finding numerous small ways to annoy Turkey or to disturb the U.S.-Turkish relationship. It expends a great deal of energy on defense. It has mounted campaigns demanding that Congressmen, congressional staffers and academic avoid going to Occupied North Cyprus. But a war of attrition demands tactical objectives as well as strategic ones. We seem to be agreed on the strategic objective: ending the Turkish occupation of 45% of the Republic of Cyprus.

Unfortunately, we show disdain at the idea of going after small, doable tactical objectives. For example, the Department of State has imposed an embargo on the sale or transfer of arms or other defense services (e.g., training) to the Republic of Cyprus. Few in our community even know that the restriction exists and no one seems interested in doing anything about it. A simple rider on any major piece of legislation could undo this in a heartbeat. It would not only relieve Cyprus of a status that it shares with Syria, Iran, and North Korea but also would communicate to friend and foe alike that the Greek-American community can deliver. Similarly, the United States and Turkey are the only two countries on the face of the earth not to have ratified the Law of the Sea Treaty. Turkey has refused to do so because the treaty’s tenets effectively demolish Turkish claims concerning territorial sea limits and seabed exploitation in the Aegean. In the United States, the U.S. Navy, the State Department, and a broad consensus of foreign policy experts agree that ratification would be in our interest. A few bombastic senators, wrapping themselves in American exceptionalism and demanding immunity from international law, have blocked ratification despite being largely ignorant of its terms and even more ignorant of its many benefits for the United States. Supporting ratification would appear to be a no-brainer for the Greek-American leadership. It would put the US squarely in the Greek camp in its dispute with Turkey and garner appreciation—even if short-lived—from important political elements in the United States.

The community has not targeted a politician for electoral defeat since 1976, when it mobilized even its strongest GOP supporters (including my late father) to defeat Gerald

Ford and Kissinger. The AHI and AHEPA publish scorecards on congressional votes but steadfastly refuse to work for the defeat of individual members with terrible track records for fear of being labeled "partisan." This refusal to actually play politics makes us unique among Americans seeking to influence political decisions. The community has stood lamely by even when it has the leverage to target individual Congressmen or to ask their friends in the Senate to block the nomination of officials with a history of being publicly pro-Turkish and anti-Greek. Nor have we extracted much influence even when members of the community have donated literally millions of dollars. In 2004, President George W. Bush raised more than two million dollars in campaign contributions from Greek Americans. The day after Bush won reelection, the US formally recognized FYROM as the Republic of Macedonia. A cabinet official told me later that "his Greek-American friends" were all right with the decision although he did not name names, nor did he have an explanation as to why they waited until the day after the election. I have yet to discern any price that Bush paid for what can only be termed treachery as bad as that of President Carter in 1978.

In 2001, the community leadership stood by when a very small cadre of Turkey's friends in the Defense Department blocked the sale of advanced anti-aircraft missiles to the Greek Navy. The missiles in question would have dramatically altered the air-sea balance in the Eastern Mediterranean. The missiles' manufacturer reached out in vain to the community leadership for assistance in completing what would have been a very lucrative piece of business. They were disappointed to discover that we were not like the Jewish lobby. In fairness to the community's leadership, the Greek Minister of Defense at the time arrogantly rejected the notion that he should deign to ask for help from lowly Greek Americans. The gentleman in question, Mr. Akis Tzohatzopoulos, now resides in Korydallos Prison awaiting trial on corruption charges.

A series of small victories has many benefits. First, victory encourages your troops and discourages your opponents. Secondly, nibbling your enemy to death kills him just as effectively as shooting him. Finally, a series of small defeats may force the opponent to the table. Holding out for the WTA solution has clearly gotten us nowhere,

All rules and grand generalizations have their exception, but building international and American pressure to force the Turkish government to allow the Ecumenical Patriarchate to reopen the theological school at Halki is an example of relatively low-hanging fruit that can be picked. One may quibble with details of the tactics, but there is no doubt that this is a project that the community can get its arms around. Defeat does not pose an existential threat to the Turkish government and a great deal of support can be found beyond the community's resources. Turkey's on-again off-again policy clearly reflects a Turkish dilemma. The Turks recognize that losing a small battle has

consequences. They also know that they have a weak argument while perceived unreasonable obstinacy has its own consequences. The recent campaign to block or at least delay the transfer of two frigates to the Turkish Navy presents another example.

That Greek and Greek-American lack of confidence leads to reluctance to pursue diplomatic initiatives is of little doubt. Recently, I spoke with Greek diplomats about the need to push the Halki issue harder, as well as calling Turkey's bluff on some small but not unimportant violations of the Treaty of Lausanne in the Aegean. One highly agitated young diplomat responded saying that they did not want to fight on any small issues because the Turks might press other issues. He did not respond to my question whether negotiating with success was not the mark of good diplomacy. Another reason for our reluctance to engage on small issues may be the fear that you cannot inspire a disinterested community unless you go after the grand emotional prize. I submit that consistent failure inspires even less.

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