Institutional Combat In American Politics Essay, Research Paper

Institutional Combat in American Politics American government seems to be on a downward slide, a downward slide caused by the degradation of American morals and values. This slip in our society has led to a new form of government, or rather a form of government new to America. “Institutional combat” is becoming a staple in American politics, a far cry from the old electoral politics. America’s growing attention span for all media, scandals, allegations, and corruption brings about this style of politics. These factors, along with others, have led to a nationwide decline in voter turnout and party stability. Because of these, America has bred a new, unique form of politics. A political system that’s run on the electoral government, yet every day incorporates more and more “institutional combat”. The addition of this form of a political weapon as an ever-increasing form of our government creates a unique form of politics only found in America. A major factor that contributes to the decline of American politics is the deterioration of our electoral system. Ginsberg and Shefter call the twentieth century “a postelectoral era”(Ginsberg and Shefter 1), insinuating that the politics of the American government is moving from out of the elections and into “institutional combat”. There are a number of facts and evidence that support this claim. First, there have been strikingly low levels of voter turnout in past recent decades of American elections (2). This trait is uniquely an American one, as other democratic countries are recording significantly larger voter turnout. Voter participation stems from a shockingly low 35% to a meager 50%, as compared to other Western democracies, where turnout usually is about 80%(3). Secondly, the level of competition in the congressional and senate races has become alarmingly low. Incumbents even have had instances of running against no one. With blowouts in the polls, Americans have lost the sense of importance in voting, striking at the heart of our governmental system. This lost sense of the importance in voting, is uniquely an American political system. This feeling is one that is only replicated in American society because of our political perspectives. Our political agenda has changed from a country that fought hard within the election, to a country where the battle for elected officials is fought outside the election. Throughout Politics by Other Means, Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter stress three main points concerning the decline of our elections, the first of which is the criminal justice system. The criminal justice system is being utilized more as a non-electoral weapon. “There has been more than a tenfold increase in the number of indictments brought by federal prosecutors against national, state and local officials”(4). Secondly, the national security apparatus is becoming a political saga that is ever increasing. Acts such as wiretaps, surveillance and domestic counterintelligence operations have been wielded into political weapons further increasing America’s scandal-clad government (8-9). Not only does this create a paranoid society in Washington it also gives way to zealots. By giving them room to maneuver and a free reign on any scandal, some politicians dedicate themselves to finding scandal. Publisher Larry Flynt even offered 1 million dollars for documented proof of any governmental official having an affair, and he received over 200 responses! Finally, the federal judiciary has become a significant factor in modern government. “The number of major issues that are fought in the courts has sharply increased in recent decades, further increasing the importance of nonelectoral conflict in America’s current political system. (7)” The federal judiciary has become the central location for solving issues like race relations and abortion relieving elected officials from having to resolve these issues in electoral format. As competition in the electoral facet of our government has declined, other areas have grown rapidly. Institutional combat has become a major player in party politics. Scandals are being used to their full potential, and parties are spending more time trying to weaken the other party through the use of the media, than to strengthen their own. This has caused what Ginsberg and Shefter call “an electoral deadlock” which they describe as being “linked to the decay of America’s traditional partisan and electoral institutions” (10). Strong parties in America lead to a better, more interesting, significant election. The decline of party power has led to an increase of non-electoral tactics, including present day scandals such as President Clinton’s. President Clinton’s scandal was unique to America in that it was more of a moral matter of right and wrong than a issue of American government. The media has played a powerful role in not only bringing such scandals to light, but in controlling how detailed, and how scandalous they actually become. Our media is becoming hungrier for scandals and controversies. It is becoming a prominent force in American politics and every day the media increases its power. “While the influence of the media has increased, the decay of party organizations has made politicians ever more dependent upon favorable media coverage” (25). The more the party’s strength withers, the more the media grows. Now it has become so very important in political elections that even a journalist’s accusation can be certain death for a politician. Newspapers, magazines and television now play prominent roles in modern elections. Watergate was the media’s entry into America’s new form of institutional combat. Media coverage on Richard Nixon was constitutionally protected and nationally scrutinized and supported by the American public. Richard Nixon fell hard, and fast, thus paving a way for a scandal hungry media unique in the fact that that it utilizes America’s First Amendment. The First Amendment lets the media have free reign to any aspect of government and society it chooses. This is a trait only found in America and will never be found in the politics and media of Great Britain or any other country.

Nowadays the media coverage of presidential and congressional campaigns is won by the candidates’ television campaigns. Unlike in smaller third world democratic countries where televisions are much rarer per capita, the American’s citizens wealth provides a unique opportunity for both candidates to express their issues and for voters too easily follow the campaign’s issues and ever increasingly it’s scandals. Although voter turnout continues to decline, voter awareness has become especially evident. However, as institutional combat takes over, more “mud-slinging” campaigns rule the airways. These negative campaigns decrease the actual legislative values of each candidate and increase the importance of their character. America is paving the way for elections that are based strictly on character issues. In Great Britain the parliamentary system is designed in such a way the both the strength of the party and the strength of the candidates issues are the major issues in the election. Since only leading figures run for office, and the dark horse is limited, the candidates chosen for nominations are usually “clean as a whistle”. Character in a politician is a necessary factor, but now it has become absolutely essential in an American politician. Due to our ever-combative system of government a “clean as a whistle” politician has a distinct advantage over one who has had a scandalous past, regardless of their political views. To me personally, this problem is becoming an ever-increasing uniquely American facet. Only in America can a candidate’s character be so heavily scrutinized that it can dictate an entire party’s campaign. Campaign’s in America are won solely on how the candidate looks, how they act, what their family situation is and whether or not they have a jaded past. I believe that this negative campaigning has led to another of America’s exceptional traits, low voter turnout. Throughout the world governments of democracy are usually systems where the voters feel privileged to vote, and turn out in droves to utilize their precious right. America has been instrumental in helping small third world and war torn countries get back on their feet and create new democratic governments, encouraging the people to come out and vote. This is why America is so exceptional, because it is the most respected democracy, and yet it is the world’s largest hypocrite when it comes to upholding democratic standards. Americans have a horrible track record for showing up to elections drawing in just under 50% for presidential election (3). Personally, I attribute this low turnout to the American society’s concept of “let someone else do it”. Our society is becoming ever increasingly numbed by the scandals and the corruption that those who turn out on Election Day grapple with such issues as “the lesser of the two evils” rather than who is the best candidate for my views, my party and my nation. Our government is a unique, amazing system that utilizes all aspects of our society. It draws from our small government and large wealthy population an electoral system. It draws from our culture of Americans who are interested in political scandal and a constitution that supports media rights. These factors combined with the trends of a bipartisan system that utilizes our democratic system to meet our needs allow for a unique and distinct political system. A system that I believe could never be duplicated by any country, including Great Britain. Great Britain’s parliamentary system might be a more stable form of government for them, and maybe even for us, but it will never be able to be as distinct or unique as America’s political system. Our government utilizes every aspect of our nature and character to create a system that supports both electoral and institutional combative forms of government.