

Our view

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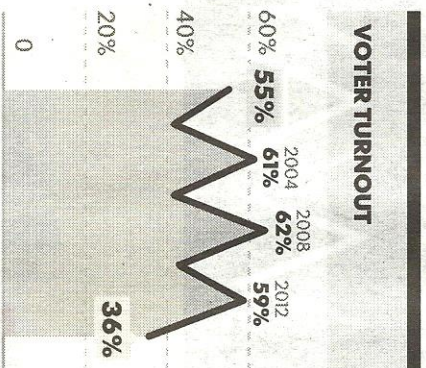
Mandatory voting won't cure nation's dismal turnout

Voter turnout in U.S. elections hardly inspires pride. The nation lags far behind most modern democracies in the percentage of its citizens who go to the polls. Even in presidential elections, only about 60% of voters show up; turnout for midterm elections is far lower — just 36% last fall.

Policymakers have tried for years to come up with ways to increase those numbers — early voting, same-day registration and voting by mail — but the impact has been small. President Obama provoked controversy last month when he mused about requiring Americans to vote, as is done in Australia and several other countries. The president was responding to a question about how to offset the effect of big money in politics. “That would counteract money more than anything,” the president said.

In Australia, 90% of eligible voters go to the polls despite minimal enforcement. Registered voters who fail to vote get a form letter asking why; almost any excuse will do to get someone off the hook. Those with no valid excuse face a fine of about \$20, which can escalate if someone refuses to pay, though that is rare.

But the idea is a non-starter in the defiantly individualistic U.S., for good reason: A nation predicated on personal freedom rightly forces its citizens to do only a very few things — pay taxes, serve



Source: United States Elections Project
ALEXANDRO GONZALEZ, USA TODAY

on juries, educate children, be drafted and serve in some wars, and lately, buy health insurance.

There's a compelling reason for each of those, but not to require people to vote. Low turnout, troubling as it is, doesn't pose an existential threat in a nation that has succeeded despite it, nor would forcing disinterested voters to the polls have much value.

If there is an exception, it's in local elections, for which turnout is generally dismal despite the high impact of local government.

Ferguson, Mo., is a prominent example. After a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed black teenager last summer, igniting angry protests, it came to light that the voter turnout in Fergu-

son's local elections is about 12%, which explains why a city that is two-thirds black has only one black city council member and a nearly all-white police force.

Ferguson's voters go to the polls again Tuesday with a chance to elect as many as three black council members, but turnout remains in doubt.

Instead of forcing people to vote, though, government should be educating them — particularly as children — about the power of democratic choice, and it should be removing obstacles that make it hard for interested voters to cast a ballot, especially would-be voters whose long working days make voting difficult.

Lately, though, politicians have been doing the opposite. Ostracism to save money and combat fraud, state officials, almost exclusively Republicans, have been pursuing a thinly veiled campaign to make voting harder. Methods include cutting back on early voting and instituting voter ID laws while making it difficult for many voters to get the required ID. Those most likely to be deterred are lower-income people, minorities and younger voters who tend not to vote Republican.

The last thing a nation with a turnout problem needs are policies that make it harder to vote. Deliberately keeping people away from the polls is just as bad as forcing them to go.

Opposing view
Required voting yields benefits

Thomas E. Mann

Mandatory voting seems downright un-American. We rightly value our individual freedom and don't like to be told what to do by a paternalistic government. Indeed, the cynics amongst us resonate to the old line against voting at all: “It only encourages them.”

But American federal, state and local governments tell us what to do and not do all the time. Paying taxes — the price of a civilized society — is compulsory. Abiding by traffic regulations restricts our freedom but helps secure our physical safety and that of our fellow citizens. Though now replaced by an all-volunteer army, conscription has been used throughout our history to secure the military personnel needed to defeat our enemies and secure our liberty. In every case, it comes down to the costs of public requirements of citizens relative to their benefits.

Several factors motivate an interest in mandatory voting today: Low turnout, especially in midterm and primary elections, contributes to extreme partisan polarization; modern campaigns reinforce non-negotiable demands by focusing disproportionately on mobilizing

(or demobilizing) the base; and politicians have little incentive to respond to those who are not reliable voters. Near universal voting is not a certain remedy for these maladies, but it just might create a virtuous cycle that improves our public life.

Dozens of countries have some form of mandatory voting. Our sister democracy, Australia, has had a particularly positive experience with it and could serve as a model for us. It requires mandatory attendance at the polls (voting for “none of the above” remains an option), with a very modest fine and liberal excuse policy for not voting. Think of it as a “nudge” rather than a punitive command. Newly eligible voters are enrolled on the registration lists and civic education programs in the schools prepare them for their responsibilities as citizens; parties and candidates go looking for their support.

It's not hard to imagine new generations of American citizens benefiting from similar developments and taking their responsibility to vote in stride.

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