

To vote or not to vote? That is a question

Jim Waters
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Some of my libertarian friends become annoyed when this column addresses low voter turnouts.

“Not voting *is* a vote,” riled-up responders declare.

True. For that reason, I don’t support mandatory voting laws - a political staple in some nations.

The hyped-up concerns that America’s turnout in national elections is lower than most other comparator countries don’t warrant even a blip on my worry radar.

Requiring citizens to vote or face a fine - as some countries do - increases turnout. However, it hardly guarantees election of the best candidates or approval of sound policies.

Still, how can we not be concerned that a minority of voters often determine elections?

Perhaps the voting challenged among us fails to grasp the consequences of decisions made by those who do take office.

Kentucky, after all, has paid a high price for electing too many politicians who refuse to implement policies needed to effectively compete with other states for genuine economic growth.

We can’t definitively answer how many Toyota headquarters would have located in Kentucky had our policymakers - like those in Texas - offered the kind of inspiring free-market vision that brightens its citizens’ prospects for the future. It’s likely, however, that our commonwealth would not have one of the highest unemployment rates and an education system where only one out of three public-school students are proficient readers.

Would Kentucky have ended its lucrative pension system for longtime politicians if more than 412,000 of the 2.9 million registered voters - only 14 percent - had weighed in during the last primary election? Could it be that Kentuckians would now enjoy school choice or better job opportunities if some of the 1.2 million registered voters who bypassed the state’s previous General Election had showed up?

We must at least allow for the possibility.

My libertarian colleagues argue that a higher voter turnout could worsen conditions - especially if those turning out are ill-informed.

“Contrary to the folklore of democratic health, low turnout can signal social solidarity, reflect real civic virtue, and even make democracy work better,” Will Wilkinson, a former research fellow at the Cato Institute, once wrote in an article entitled “Thank You for Not Voting” about a Canadian federal election that produced that nation’s lowest voter turnout in history.

“So when turnout drops, it tends to leave the pool of remaining voters with an improved average level of political knowledge and policy know-how,” Wilkinson writes. “If well-informed voters have a better picture of the candidate or party most likely to promote the general welfare, then especially high turnout can actually tilt an election away from the better choice, leaving everyone a bit worse off.”

That’s a compelling argument suited especially for national elections.

After all, could we as a nation be much worse off had “the flakiest voters,” as Wilkinson referred to the “least motivated” participants, stayed home during the last two presidential elections that had some of the largest turnouts in modern times?

But we need a different *argument de vente* when it comes to state and local elections. Too few turning out in those elections has left Kentucky “worse off.”

Was Kentucky better off with former Democratic Rep. John Arnold, D-Sturgis, getting elected 10 times in the House where he did little, if anything, of significance for his constituents other than sexually harass legislative aids for years for which he’s been reprimanded and fined by the state Legislative Ethics Commission?

Did only 4,427 of the 19,399 registered voters in Arnold’s Seventh District bothering to turn out to vote in his last primary make Kentucky better off?

Did Arnold winning by five single votes in the 2012 general election make Kentucky better off?

No more than you will by bypassing the voting booth on May 20.