

Not Voting Is a Powerful Form of Dissent

Doug Bandow

June 21, 2016

Imagine living in a country in which the two major parties had nominated a statist, war-mongering crook and a nasty authoritarian narcissist. Imagine being embarrassed that after more than two centuries of existence this apparently was the best your beloved country could do. Imagine considering that the best option on Election Day might be committing ritual Seppuku, but deciding to stay home instead.

The Freedom to Stay Home

But then imagine government officials showing up at your door, demanding that you accompany them to the polling place to vote for one of the candidates who you would scratch your eyes out before actually watching speak. That is the world which some high-minded “civic activists” desire.

Every election can be expected to unleash ponderous commentaries bemoaning low voter turnout. Many Americans don't register, let alone cast ballots. Why, oh why, won't they get out and participate—which usually means vote left? It is so unfair, we are told. The wealthy, elderly, and well-educated disproportionately participate, which “skews policymaking,” complained the *Economist*. Just think of all the government programs the underrepresented could vote for themselves if only they showed up on Election Day.

Politicians have no right to insist that the disaffected suffer through the humiliation of voting.

Of course, there is another way of looking at the process. Today those most likely to follow politics, understand issues, watch the news, and know the candidates vote disproportionately. Which might “skew” policy, but presumably in a very good way. Those choosing America's leaders are actually more likely to know something. Amazing thought!

Forced to Vote

For those determined to drive more people to the polls, the options seem few. Civic propaganda and celebrity endorsements don't do much. Postal ballots actually may reinforce existing voting patterns. Election Day registration has limited effect. Treating elections as a holiday is a bust.

So, as one would expect, minds turn to coercion. *Make* people vote. Force them to act on their ignorance and prejudice. All that matters is pushing up turnout numbers.

The politics is clear. Polls indicate that American non-voters tend to favor Democrats. (Some surprise—those with the least interest in elections and knowledge about issues are more likely to favor the party which popularized the strategy of tax, spend, and elect.) No wonder Democrats are more likely to push increased voting by any means possible fair or foul.

Mandatory voting isn't a new idea. Both Australia and Belgium penalize non-voters. Down Under you get hit with a roughly \$14 fine if you don't have a good excuse for staying home. (A bit like having a parent's note for missing a day of school.)

Of course, those in favor of a coerced ballot emphasize that you are free to do what you want once you are in the polling place—choose no one, spoil the ballot, write in Mickey Mouse, or tear up the sheet. At least the authorities don't look over your shoulder to ensure that you mark one of the approved establishment alternatives for office.

Of course, there are worse impositions in life. Government shoots people for resisting its authority, sends people off to die in foolish foreign wars, invades people's homes to punish them for conduct which threatens no one, steals property on the claim that it is drug-related, seizes workers' incomes to spread among political supporters and other influential interest groups, and much more. Requiring you to show up on Election Day appears, well, minor compared to so much else that government does!

A Matter of Conscience

However, seemingly small exactions reinforce the presumption that the state determines and sanctions individual rights. A refusal to vote, thereby encouraging those who compete to dominate and control the lives of others, is a matter of basic conscience.

Of course, one can argue that such staying home is irresponsible. Voting for a third party also registers dissent, but in most elections the numbers are barely noticed. This election might be different, but who knows? As for choosing the lesser of two evils, the likelihood that any one vote will make a difference is so small as to be a strong argument *against* wasting time trooping down to the polls.

Moreover, if those committed to liberty are unable to defeat the cavalcade of big-spending war-mongers, which characterizes most presidents and presidential candidates of late, the best tactic might be withdrawing legitimacy from those who win. The spectacle of a steadily increasing share of the population abstaining from a process which yields choices between Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee might spark a conversation more substantive than the designer label on the dress worn by the latest celebrity to appear at the latest red carpet event.

If the usual suspects are determined to launch a campaign to improve civic America, maybe they should start with education. Today the public schools fail many Americans, especially those of limited means. Too often kids are shot and killed in schools which would have failed to educate them even had they survived.

Obviously, “public” education is not transmitting academic and practice skills necessary for many people to compete in a global world. The schools also aren’t teaching citizenship values, most notably the importance of protecting liberty and creating a social order outside of the state.

Instead of developing strategies to hike voter turnout, how about focusing on education—getting it out from state control—to prepare everyone to vote if they choose to do so? That would be better than seeking to dragoon the disinterested, ignorant, foolish, and hostile into going to the polls.

A Powerful Dissent

Ultimately, however, the issue of voting comes down to conscience. Politicians have no right to insist that the disaffected suffer through the humiliation of voting when the choices are so awful. Indeed, simply saying no and refusing to cast a ballot is a powerful form of dissent. A decision not to vote deserves the same respect as one to participate.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of a number of books on economics and politics.