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Good Question: Should Uninformed Voters Stay Home?



Reporting Jason DeRusha

(WCCO) It's a constant message on Election Day: get out and vote. It's generally accepted that the more voters, the better. The higher turnout, the better. But what about people who admit they don't know anything about the issues or the candidates in a given race? Is an uninformed vote better than not voting at all?

"If I don't know enough I abstain," said Dan Becchetti, a voter who said he's sitting out the November 2009 election.

"I go back and forth [on this issue]," noted Randy Fordice, "on the one hand I want everyone to vote," on the other, he said, he doesn't want uninformed people to cancel his vote.

"That's the question I'm grappling with right now," wrote Kurtis Scaletta on Facebook. "Should I vote, or not impose my ignorance on the process? And sure, I could educate myself, but I'm not feeling that up to it today."

According to a new study by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College, Minnesota is tops in the nation in civic engagement. Voter turnout averages nearly 78 percent, which is 14 percent higher than the national average.

"Don't you feel guilty [not voting]?" asked WCCO reporter Jason DeRusha. "I feel good I'm letting the people who are educated make the decision for me," Becchetti explained.

"The act of voting is itself an important civic act," said Harry Boyte, co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, who would prefer that people take the time to get informed.

Although Boyte said, he believes, people often are more informed than they think.

"I'm arguing that your gut instinct can be more important than detailed knowledge of their public policies," he said.

A 2004 CATO Institute study asserted that 25 percent of voters were not informed, meaning that they either weren't aware of the issues or had an incorrect understanding of the facts.

Many scholars and writers have argued that uninformed voters are doing a disservice by simply casting a ballot out of obligation or civic duty. Economist Bryan Caplan wrote a book, "The Myth of the Rational Voter," arguing that uninformed voters have an obligation to just stay home.

"This is a real tough question," wrote Bryan Legal on Facebook. "On one hand, everyone should make fully informed decisions about choices that can affect them for a significant amount of time. If you're not informed, how can you make the right choice? However, it is our civic duty in a democratic nation to voice our concerns and have a representative government (how can it be representative if everyone doesn't have an equal voice?). We must allow everyone a full vote, no matter how informed each individual is."

Boyte said he believes that uninformed voters cancel themselves out, rather than canceling out the votes of informed voters. Besides, he notes, "There's different ways of defining informed."

"If I don't know a race, what I do is ask people who I know are knowledgeable," he said. And, having an encyclopedic knowledge of issues "doesn't guarantee wisdom," said Boyte.



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