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Long Reads

Who Should Vote in America?

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NEW YORK – The US midterm elections this November will tell us where American voters want their country to go. Will they endorse US President Donald Trump’s “America First” vision, or will they reject his brand of anti-globalist illiberalism by handing one or both houses of Congress to the Democrats?

This question admits of no easy answer, because if the history of past midterm elections is any guide, two-thirds of eligible voters won’t even bother to show up. In the last US midterm election, in 2014, turnout plumbed a 72-year low. Two years before Trump was elected with three million fewer votes than his opponent, a mere 92.3 million Americans cast ballots. Such low turnout, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders lamented at the time, “was an international disgrace.”

In general, US voter turnout consistently falls below that of most other developed countries. For the past two decades, the average US voter-participation rate in both midterm and presidential elections has hovered just above 50%, down from more than 60% throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Crucially, only some 30% of households with an annual income below \$30,000 have bothered to vote in recent years.

As a result of Americans’ diminished political engagement and lost confidence in the democratic process, the Economist Intelligence Unit recently downgraded the US from a “full” to a “flawed” democracy.

The AWOL Voter

Low election turnout bears directly on public policy, by encouraging politicians to cater to the interests of reliable voter cohorts, rather than to a broader cross-section of the entire population. But policies that are narrowly targeted to the interests of the few tend to deepen social divisions and undercut economic dynamism. Moreover, widespread apathy about the democratic process can put the political system itself at risk. When only a small share of the population votes, the resulting government will lack credibility.

This is not mere speculation. History is rife with sobering examples of what can happen when a citizenry disengages. In Poland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, falling participation among the enfranchised aristocracy allowed a narrow segment of powerful nobles to seize control of the country's political processes. Over time, the country's institutions were hollowed out, and this sapping of national strength is thought to have contributed to Poland's dismemberment at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1795, Poland essentially ceased to exist when it was partitioned between Austria, Prussia, and Russia.

By contrast, in the nineteenth century, Britain managed to broaden its electoral base in response to rampant corruption in its "rotten boroughs." Before the Reform Act of 1832, some electoral districts (boroughs) were so small that a single family – or even an individual – could choose a Member of Parliament. But through wider enfranchisement and thus an expansion of the electorate, Britain strengthened voter participation among its growing middle classes, and probably staved off the kind of revolutions that roiled Europe during the subsequent century.

Forcing the Issue

There are many ways to boost voter turnout, but not all of them will appeal to the large segment of Americans who hate being told what to do. Nonetheless, if America's democracy is to survive and function, its citizenry must be reincorporated into the political process.

To that end, one obvious solution is mandatory voting, which is currently enforced in 26 countries around the world. In 1893, Belgium became the first country in the modern era to adopt compulsory voting, after politicians hoping to empower the working classes pushed through a parliamentary act imposing fines – and sometimes disenfranchisement – on all those who failed to turn out for elections.

Australia followed suit in 1924 with an amendment to its Commonwealth Electoral Act. Between 1919 and 1922, Australia's voter turnout had fallen from over 70% to under 60%. With the new legislation in place, it rose to 91% in 1925. And almost a century later, the country's voter-participation rate still ranks above that of most other developed countries.

Voter apathy in the US has already surpassed that of Australia in the early 1920s. The experience of countries with compulsory voting, however, suggests that America's declining civic engagement could be reversed. In 2014's European Parliament elections, mandatory voting in Belgium and Luxembourg produced turnouts of 90% and 86%, respectively, whereas non-mandatory voting in France and Spain led to turnouts of just 42.4% and 43.8%.

To be sure, in Belgium, voters go to the polls under the threat of fines and, potentially, disqualification from public-sector employment if they stay home. But mandatory (or quasi-mandatory) voting does create a larger voter pool, and thus requires elected politicians to act with a broader range of interests in mind. And if

politicians are accountable to 90% of the electorate, instead of just half, citizens will have a greater sense of control over – and confidence in – political outcomes.

Broadening the Base

In the US, one would expect mandatory voting to boost turnout among lower-income groups and minorities, thus changing party alignments and elected politicians' template for campaigning and governing. Yet research suggests that the political consequences of compulsory voting are not always as predictable or clear-cut as they might first seem. For example, many assume that mandatory voting would favor left-of-center candidates. But, as Shane Singh of the University of Georgia has shown, compulsory voting in Australia has not prevented center-right parties from holding power.

This is not to say that mandatory voting does not change the makeup of an electorate in meaningful ways. After the Netherlands abolished compulsory voting in 1967, turnout fell by 20% across the board; but the decline was most acute among voters under 30, whose participation rate more than halved between 1966 and 1999.

Now, consider what such a transformation in the other direction would mean for this year's US midterm election. If candidates from both major parties expected, say, 75% voter participation among young and low-income households, the policies on offer would be vastly different from what they are today. At a minimum, electoral platforms would be geared less toward older, relatively affluent voters, and more toward the general population.

But, more fundamentally, politicians – and particularly incumbents – would have to act differently. With a broader array of votes to capture, they would be under greater pressure to make a sound case for their policy choices, rather than merely appealing to the “typical voter” profile to which they have become accustomed.

Radical Measures

Another approach is to focus not so much on voter participation as on the quality of voters' choices. For example, democratic governments could require that voters pass a basic civics test, just as all motorists must pass a driving test. After all, immigrants to the US, parts of Europe, and Australia already must pass such a test to become citizens and gain the right to vote, regardless of their education, wealth, race, gender, or country of origin.

Of course, even to suggest such a test in the US is to invite criticism, given the country's sordid history of denying civil rights and suffrage to large groups of people. Until the 1960s, difficult literacy tests and prohibitive poll taxes aimed at disenfranchising racial minorities and the poor were a hallmark of the Jim Crow era. Needless to say, any proposal for voter-eligibility tests today would have to be carefully crafted to avoid abuse and discrimination. The alternative is that voters will remain disengaged, under-educated, and, indeed, disenfranchised by choice or circumstance.

Yet another approach would be to allocate more weight to votes cast by more engaged citizens. Just last month, the US Supreme Court ruled (by a 5-4 margin) that Ohio may remove people from voter-registration rolls if they miss two national election cycles or fail to mail back forms confirming their voter eligibility after missing just one election.

Six other US states have similar “use-it-or-lose-it” laws on the books. In effect, these provisions punish citizens who do not consistently engage in the political process, by forcing them to re-register if they have opted out in the recent past. On the surface, the Supreme Court’s decision might look like a departure from the democratic ideal of “one person, one vote.” And, to be sure, critics of the ruling regard it as an affirmation of voter-suppression efforts across a number of Republican-controlled states.

Still, the issue again comes down to how the policy itself is crafted. In principle, laws that emphasize the importance of voting as a civic duty are good for democracy if they create a more engaged electorate. But such laws should focus on encouraging more people to vote, not on purging electoral rolls.

To understand how weighted voting would work in practice, we can look to the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, which weighs votes for party leadership posts by geography. Under the Ontario PC’s system, candidates must win broad support across the province, rather than in a handful of high-density population centers, because the final vote tally from a less populous district carries the same weight as that of a more populous one. This means that each vote cast in smaller districts is worth more than a vote cast in larger districts.

Whether weighted voting is based on geography or engagement, the point is that it can be structured in such a way as to force candidates to engage with a broader voter base. And that, in turn, ensures that election results are credible and genuinely representative.

Rejuvenating Democracy

Democracies must be able to move between short- and long-term policy priorities if they are going to develop a convincing model for achieving broadly shared prosperity. And, regardless of the priorities at any given time, policies must be informed by credible, representative elections.

That imperative has become all the more pressing as world’s leading democracies confront serious long-term economic risks, from aging populations and climate change to tepid productivity growth and technology-driven job displacement. To meet the challenges that lie ahead, they will have to show that they can adapt to change. And that will require a willingness to explore new ideas for boosting voter engagement and improving the functioning of the political process.

There will always be skeptics who insist that freedom from the prying eyes of the government is all that matters, and that people should be able to opt out of the electoral process if it suits them to do so. But the future of democracy might well depend on whether we are willing to put tomorrow's freedoms ahead of today's right to disengage.



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15 Commentaries

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