

Make Voting Mandatory in the U.S.

By Dambisa Moyo

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Around the world, citizens appear to be re-engaging with democracy. In May, voter turnout at the European parliamentary elections reached a 20-year high, and in 2018 turnout for the United States midterm elections was the highest in a hundred years.

Yet in each instance, voter turnout reached just a feeble 50 percent. In the context of recent history, that was a surge. In the 2014 United States midterms, only 37 percent of the electorate voted, rising to 50 percent in 2018. In Europe, this year's turnout was 50 percent — up from 42 percent in 2014.

While turnouts are higher in United States presidential elections — 60 percent in 2016 — can we say that democracy is thriving when 40 to 50 percent of voters still opt to stay at home? The United States is generally near the bottom of the list of well-off countries in its rate of voter participation.

Shortly after the 2014 elections, Senator Bernie Sanders admonished the country, saying “Americans should be embarrassed.” The low voter turnout, he wrote in *The Guardian*, “was an international disgrace.”

Low voter turnout encourages politicians to design policies that cater to the interests of the few over the many. This, in turn, promotes societal division and harms the economy.

In the United States, nearly half the people who don't vote have family incomes below \$30,000, and just 19 percent of likely voters come from low-income families. So it's hardly surprising that the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index downgraded the United States from a “full democracy” to a “flawed democracy” in 2017, based on diminished voter engagement and confidence in the democratic process.

This long-term apathy puts the political system at risk. The government's credibility is threatened when so few people participate. In the interest of preserving democracy, we need engaged citizens to go to the polls.

An effective way to address this problem — one that might not appeal to Americans who hate the idea of being told what to do — is mandatory voting, which is currently the law in more than 20 countries.



In 1893 Belgium became the first democracy to institute compulsory voting by parliamentary act. Backers saw it as a way to empower the working classes. Australia introduced compulsory voting through an amendment to its Electoral Act in 1924, in response to declining voter numbers. Turnout in 1922 had fallen below 60 percent from more than 70 percent in 1919. The impact of legislation was swift: In 1925, 91 percent of the electorate voted. What's more, a century later, compulsory voting still works.

The bigger the voter pool, the stronger the contract is between citizens and leaders. In this year's European parliamentary elections, mandatory voting in Belgium and Luxembourg led respectively to turnouts of about 90 percent and 86 percent. By comparison, turnout in France was 50 percent, and in the Netherlands it was 42 percent.

If the United States had mandatory voting, there likely would be a greater turnout among lower-income groups and minorities, which could lead to a change in the types of politicians elected. One might think this would favor Democratic candidates, but that's not necessarily the case. While compulsory voting has been assumed to help Australia's Labor Party, for example, it has not prevented right-of-center parties from holding power.

Research on mandatory voting does not provide a clear picture of its political consequences. Still, it's clear that a voting requirement can change the makeup of the electorate. After the Netherlands removed mandatory voting in 1967, voter participation fell by nearly 20 percent.

We should also consider other, more radical, ways to make voters better informed and more engaged. For instance, citizens could be required to pass a government-sanctioned civics test to vote. In the United States, Australia and several European and Asian countries, immigrants — regardless of education level or country of origin — are already required to pass civics tests to become citizens.

Of course, the checkered history of civil rights and suffrage means even the suggestion of such tests would be ripe for criticism and, if implemented carelessly, subject to abuse and discrimination. Some would surely object to this proposal as reviving the sorts of tests once used to disenfranchise racial minorities and the poor in the United States, and certainly we must ensure such discrimination does not occur again. Yet letting voters be under informed shortchanges them.

A more extreme requirement would see democracies allocate greater weight to the votes of citizens who are more engaged in the political process. In 2018, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Ohio can exclude voters from the electoral rolls if they don't vote for a few election cycles and don't return an address-confirmation card. Six other states have similar laws in place.

The court's decision rewards citizens who remain engaged in the electoral process and punishes those who don't. This might seem like a step back from the democratic ideal of one person one vote, but it brings into sharp focus the importance of voting as a civic duty. That said, it should be implemented in a way that encourages people to engage and vote rather than serving to "clean up" an electoral register.

In the face of serious long-term economic threats, the world's strongest republics must demonstrate that they can be resilient, not by resisting change but by adapting. This requires a willingness to explore ideas that could fortify democracy. For skeptics — and for those who believe the answer is always more freedom, not less — the answer may be to put the securing of tomorrow's freedoms above the right to skip out on voting today.

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