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The U.S. Should Require All Citizens to Vote

By Norman Ornstein

But if it won't, here's one possible incentive: Your voting receipt could become a Mega Millions lottery ticket.



Counting ballots in

Melbourne. (Reuters)

One of the major problems contributing to the extraordinary dysfunction of the American political system is the series of voting processes that gives immense influence to the extreme, ideologically driven bases of the two major parties. In today's base-driven elections, party strategists try to maximize the turnout of their own base -- usually by frightening them to death about the consequences if the "enemy" prevails -- while minimizing the turnout of the other side by any means necessary and available.

In my view, the best way to ameliorate this malign dynamic is to find ways to enlarge the electorate in primaries and general elections -- to move our politics to where persuadable voters in the middle have more impact. If I could do one thing to counter our dysfunction, it would be to adopt a version of the Australian system of mandatory attendance at the polls.

For more than 70 years in Australia, registered voters have been required to show up at the polls on Election Day. While they do not have to vote -- they can cast ballots for "none of the above" -- a failure to appear incurs a fine of roughly \$15. (This fine can be avoided by writing a letter explaining why illness, travel, or another legitimate excuse kept one away.) Demonstrating that relatively small incentives or disincentives can have a large effect on



Solving the nation's

behavior (see the book *Nudge* by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein), every Australian election since the system's implementation has had a turnout of over 90 percent. Over time, Australians have been inculcated with the idea that voting is a civic responsibility.

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Why would increasing turnout make a difference? It is not that high turnout is a surefire indicator of civic health and democratic values -- the former Soviet Union, after all, boasted 98 percent turnouts. The greater impact is on the culture of politicians. Australian politicians of all stripes say that knowing both parties' bases will certainly vote motivates them to focus on those persuadable voters in the middle. They do not emphasize the kinds of wedge issues like guns, gays, or abortion that dominate American discourse. Instead, politicians focus on the bigger questions -- like the economy, jobs, and education -- that drive the voters in the middle, and they avoid the kind of vicious or vitriolic campaign rhetoric that turns off the persuadable voters.

Australia has another feature that is highly attractive and desirable: preference voting, where voters rank-order candidates from most preferred to least. Such a system prevents minor parties or independent candidates from acting as spoilers -- *a la* Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan in 2000 -- but still allows voters whose first options don't prevail to influence the outcome via their second and third choices. This makes for more honest choices and broader coalitions.

Of course, mandatory voting has no serious chance of being enacted in the United States, where mandates of any sort are (as you might have noticed) unpopular. Americans rebel viscerally against the idea of taking away the freedom not to vote, even if the consequence is simply a modest penalty or the requirement to write an excuse. So I also favor exploring ways to expand the electorate by using incentives instead of disincentives.

My favorite incentive approach is a "Mega Millions lottery," where one's voting receipt is also one's lottery ticket. The lure of a major prize could and would motivate people to vote, the same way the multimillion dollar Mega Millions prize in 2012 motivated many to stand in line for hours for a chance to buy a lottery ticket that gave a one-in-176-million chance to become a multimillionaire. A lottery could increase turnout dramatically and overnight, and is a model that could be employed at all levels (say, a chance to win a car donated by a local dealer for a local election).

Our best hope for changing the damaging culture which elects people who embrace rigid and extreme ideas is for more Americans to exert some influence in elections.

Beyond incentives like these, other things could make voting easier. One is moving Election Day from Tuesday (an anachronism, initiated by law in the 1840s to make it easier for Americans to travel to the polling place without creating problems for Market Day or observing the Sabbath) to the weekend. In my ideal world, voting would take place over a 24-hour period from noon Saturday to noon Sunday, thus avoiding any Sabbath problems or overcrowding at peak periods before and after the workday. There would also be early voting on the three days before the weekend to accommodate those who will be away. I would also like to modernize our voter registration system and ballot design so that Americans could vote not just in their home precincts but also near their workplaces or in voting centers.

Of course, expanding the ability and ease for more Americans to vote may first require a vigorous effort to roll back recent, extensive voter suppression efforts, from onerous, partisan-driven voter ID laws (as in Pennsylvania, Texas, and New Hampshire) to attempts to purge the voter rolls that go well beyond

narrowly targeted efforts to eliminate non-citizens (see Florida as the prime example).

One other area is worth encouraging: the kind of open primaries that have been implemented in several states, including California, and will be on the ballot this fall in Arizona. While no panacea, open primaries can dilute the impact of narrow bands of ideologues by encouraging the emergence of more mainstream candidates and protecting incumbents threatened with primary battles if they do not hew to rigid ideological orthodoxy.

Most of the open primary systems simply choose the top two candidates, regardless of party affiliation, to compete on the ballot in November (if no one gets more than 50 percent in the primary). If instead the open primary chose three or more candidates via preference voting, or simply included preference voting, the system would be far better. It also might avoid election anomalies such as the recent California congressional race, in which one district's split of votes among multiple candidates resulted in a slate of just two conservative Republicans--despite the fact that the district is distinctly moderate and Democratic in nature.

I am not a naïf. I recognize full well that most of these ideas are unlikely to be adopted soon, and I also know that none would be a panacea. Indeed, there is a case to be made that the sharp polarization and tribalism that has come to dominate Washington has metastasized to the American public, and that the center of the electorate--nearly invisible in Congress--will soon be hard to find in the rest of the country. But our best hope for changing the damaging culture which enhances the tribal wars and elects people who disdain compromise and embrace rigid and extreme ideas is to create more opportunities for more Americans to exert some influence in all elections.

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