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Taking Democracy Seriously

By Joel S. Hirschhorn

American: *So you mean that if you Australians don't vote, you get a fine?* Australian: *Yeah, and when you Americans don't vote you get George W. Bush.*

As surely as politicians lie, citizen apathy produces democracy atrophy. Much more than a right – in a democracy voting is an irrevocable civic duty. No mental gymnastics can help you jump over this ugly reality: Voter turnout over all American elections averages markedly less than half of eligible voters. This disgrace must be fixed.

These are my proposed solutions: We should make voting mandatory, give voters the option of “none of the above,” make Election Day a national holiday, provide same day registration everywhere, and lower the voting age to 16. No one reform is a panacea. But together these five reforms can dramatically re-energize voting in America. They could be placed in one constitutional amendment and ratified by the states in time for the 2008 presidential election. Limiting public support, however, is an elitist mindset among people with political power, wealth and intellectual arrogance. They wrongly dismiss large numbers of citizens for their lack of education or political involvement. Electoral reforms can create a culture of voting that ultimately produces a more informed public.

Mandatory Voting

This is not a crazy, radical idea. Hold your reaction on what probably is a new idea for you. Over 30 countries have compulsory voting. Violating the law usually merits something akin to a parking fine, but it still works. When Australia adopted it in 1924 turnouts increased from under 50 percent to a consistent 90-plus percent. Conversely, when the Netherlands eliminated compulsory voting in 1970 voting turnouts plunged from 90 percent to less than 50 percent. Polls regularly show 70 percent to 80 percent of Australians support mandatory voting. Research found that people living in countries with compulsory voting are roughly twice as likely to believe that their government is responsive to the public's needs and 2.8 times as likely to vote as compared to citizens in countries without compulsory voting. Is compulsory voting inconsistent with personal freedom? No! We have compulsory education, jury duty, and taxes that are more onerous than voting periodically. And all people have to do is turn out to vote. What they do with their secret ballot is up to them.

Counting Dissatisfaction

When people can officially say with their ballot that none of the candidates is acceptable, it makes compulsory voting more palatable. In turn, it can increase voting for ballot initiatives and measures. And it is better than lesser-evil voting that has become all too common, because of the two-party duopoly's stranglehold on our political system. It beats so-called “Mickey Mouse” voting, whereby people write in frivolous names. Nevada offers the None of the Above option, though the candidate with the greatest number of votes wins. Yet protest votes are counted, sending a message to parties and politicians.

Election Day Holiday

Standing in a long line to vote often loses out to being at work or doing other things typical of work and school days. Long commute times add to peoples' time poverty. On a holiday, voting would be more evenly spread out throughout the day and could be held at more places. It would be easier to recruit the best qualified poll workers and government costs would

be reduced because of shorter hours. A national holiday also sends an important message: Voting is critically important and something to be celebrated. Opinion surveys have found that 60 percent or more favor making Election Day a holiday. The National Commission on Federal Election Reform made a strong case for this action. Like others, the commission backed moving Veterans' Day to coincide with Election Day. The holiday might be called Veterans' Democracy Election Day. Most Western democracies hold elections on either holidays or weekends. In Puerto Rico people are given the day off and voter turnouts are typically over 80 percent. Early and absentee voting attack some problems. But a national holiday that celebrates the sacred duty of voting by all eligible voters makes more sense. Voting should become more of a social, community activity, bringing Americans together, rather than something done as quickly as possible to get it over with.

Same Day Registration

At least 30 percent of eligible voters do not vote because they are not registered. It makes no sense to make registration onerous. It should be done automatically once voter rolls are established and once citizens show up the first time to vote and present residence and citizenship qualifications, as required. Same day registration has been used successfully in some states for about 30 years. Minnesota, Maine, New Hampshire, Idaho, Wisconsin, Montana, Connecticut, and Wyoming use this approach. North Dakota abandoned registration entirely in 1951. Five of these states have the highest voter turnout in the country. When Montana used it for the first time in 2006, voter turnout jumped from the usual 50 percent to 70 percent. With more same day registration it is appropriate to have more safeguards against all forms of voter fraud, especially registering non-citizens.

Youthful Citizens

We place no upper age restriction on voting, even though some elderly people have reduced mental capabilities, and are often taken advantage of by get-out-the-vote efforts of the two major parties. Our political system is deciding the future for our younger citizens. On fairness alone, balancing a large over-50 voting bloc with younger citizens is justified. Youths age 16 to 18 pay substantial taxes, are often treated as adults in criminal cases, have definite interests impacted by public policy, and in some states can marry and obtain a driver's license. Being in high school is an advantage, because there is more stability and time to build a habit of voting. Considering our Information Age, lowering the age to 16 makes perfect sense. What happens between ages 16 and 18 to make younger citizens more qualified to vote? Nothing. There is a movement to register 16 year olds, but making them wait until 18 to vote is plain silly. New, younger voters can help make voting a patriotic family activity on the new national holiday.

Countries using this lower age include Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Isle of Man, and movements for doing so are strong in Britain, Canada and many more. In Germany, a greater proportion of 16 and 17 year-olds voted than those aged 18 to 35 – and twice as many as those in their later 20s – in municipal elections in Hanover. In local elections in Vienna, Austria, 59 percent of 16- to 18-year-olds cast a ballot, about the same as other age groups. Rather than starting wars to spread democracy, America could lead a global surge in voter entitlement. This is what populism is all about.

A Constitutional Necessity

Voting is the heart of a healthy democracy. With our persistent low voter turnout, the heart of American democracy is barely beating. The decline of American democracy is both a

cause and consequence of low voter turnout. Low voter turnout makes a mockery of representative democracy. Most politicians get elected with – at best – not much more than 25 percent of eligible voters. This may explain why bought-and-paid-for politicians mostly represent corporate and other special interests. Hefty political contributions by less than 1 percent of adults trump voting.

Face facts. Incremental and piecemeal attempts at electoral reforms have failed. Why? Because those in power do not want across-the-board high voter turnout. Shame on them. And shame on us for letting Democrats and Republicans get away with using costly means to get out their base supporters. This perpetuates divisive partisan politics that entertain and anger Americans rather than serve them – 70 percent of whom are centrists.

Now is the time for one bold constitutional amendment that can grab public attention and move the nation forward. If Congress is too cowardly to propose the amendment, then we need two-thirds of state legislatures to request an Article V Convention for this purpose; to learn more about this never-used constitutional right go to www.foavc.org.

Let us begin by urging members of Congress and 2008 presidential candidates to take a public stand on electoral reforms. Will Democrats and Republicans walk the talk of cooperation for the good of the nation?

Abraham Lincoln spoke of government "of the people, by the people and for the people." If you really believe in these words, then speak out to increase voter turnout to resuscitate America's half-dead democracy.