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7 Why Vote?

Does anyone really care about voting anymore? Only about half of the eligible U.S. voters even bother to vote in federal elections. The percentage ranges from around 49 percent (1996) to 63 percent (1960). In the 2000 U.S. national election, only 51.3 percent of eligible voters chose to go to the polls.¹

Now, if you live in a country like Australia, where the law requires that you vote, you might find our lackadaisical voting behavior here in the U.S. to be shocking. Perhaps we should be taken to the woodshed for our frequent failure to vote, but — although it's certainly true that we are a bit cavalier about exercising our voting rights — have you ever heard of anyone who doesn't want the *right* to vote?

When the United States was formed, our founders had a clear idea what government should and should not be. The purpose of the government was to provide for the common good.

As Benjamin Franklin wrote, “In free governments the rulers are the servants and the people their superiors and sovereigns.”

Our founders intended that the ultimate power in our society should rest in the people themselves. They set it up so that we should exercise those powers either directly or through representatives.

“Government is instituted for the common good; for the protection, safety, prosperity, and happiness of the people; and not for profit,

honor, or private interest of any one man, family, or class of men; therefore, the people alone have an incontestable, unalienable, and indefeasible right to institute government; and to reform, alter, or totally change the same, when their protection, safety, prosperity, and happiness require it.”

— John Adams, Article VII, Massachusetts Constitution

“There is only one force in the nation that can be depended upon to keep the government pure and the governors honest, and that is the people themselves. They alone, if well informed, are capable of preventing the corruption of power, and of restoring the nation to its rightful course if it should go astray. They alone are the safest depository of the ultimate powers of government.”

— Thomas Jefferson

If we, collectively, are the source of authority for our government, we must have a way to communicate our instructions. We must be able to select the representatives we think can best implement our will; we need to be able to change them, reorganize them if need be, and decide how they will conduct our business.

Most importantly, we must reach some approximate agreement about what we want, and that is done by placing people, initiatives and referenda on the ballot and casting our votes on them.

We are a nation of laws, but if our laws conflict with our collective will, there will be little incentive to follow them. It is only because our representatives were chosen by our own voice that we agree to abide by the laws they vote upon, on our behalf.

Because our representatives must return to us from time to time, asking for permission to represent us again, we have a way to encourage them to behave the way we want them to.

“Nothing so strongly impels a man to regard the interest of his constituents, as the certainty of returning to the general mass of the people, from whence he was taken, where he must participate in their burdens.”

— George Mason

Speech, Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 17, 1788

Trust is the element that keeps us from taking to the streets every time we disagree with something our government does. As long as we feel our representatives are deciding most things, and the very important things, the way we would ask them to, we are content. If we elected them in an election that all agreed was fair, but they make an egregious choice, one that many of us feel we cannot live with, our governmental system sanctions our protest. We reserve such behavior for unusual circumstances, knowing that when the next election rolls around, we can always vote them out.

Perceived lack of integrity in the voting system is guaranteed to produce shouts of indignation, but because *most* elections are perceived to be fair, we can still show some patience with the situation.

If, however, we come to perceive that most elections cannot be trusted, we've got a huge problem. Suddenly, these people don't have our permission to do anything. Why should we follow laws that they passed if we don't believe they were fairly elected? Why should we accept anything they do? Why should we follow the law if *they* didn't? Why should we cooperate with our government at all?

“That love of order and obedience to the laws, which so remarkably characterize the citizens of the United States, are sure pledges of internal tranquility; and the elective franchise, if guarded as the ark of our safety, will peaceably dissipate all combinations to subvert a Constitution, dictated by the wisdom, and resting on the will of the people.”

— Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Waring, 1801

Take away trust in the voting system, and all bets are off. This is what the architects of the new, un-auditable voting systems have never understood: The vote is the underpinning for our authorization of every law, every government expenditure, every tax, every elected person. But if we don't *trust* the voting system, we will never accept that those votes represent our voice, and that kind of thing can cause a whole society to quit cooperating.

“I like to see the people awake and alert. The good sense of the

people will soon lead them back if they have erred in a moment of surprise.”

— Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1786

Democracy is for suckers?

Americans prefer to feel good. They want to believe that elections are fair, that machines count right and that people don't cheat. And yet, there are scholars even within our own country who might advocate, if not subverting the system, at least lying to the voters.

According to the late University of Chicago professor Leo Strauss, governments are based on fraud. He believed that ordinary people can't handle this truth. ² “[Strauss] argued that Platonic truth is too hard for people to bear,” writes political columnist William Pfaff. “... Hence it has become necessary to tell lies to people about the nature of political reality. An elite recognizes the truth, however, and keeps it to itself. ... The ostensibly hidden truth is that expediency works.” ³

Such a philosophy, when applied by radicals, might lead to considerable dissarray in our society. In fact, when writers like Pfaff and Seymour Hersh exposed the Straussian studies of Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, Abram Shulsky of the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans, and writer William Kristol, a great hue and cry arose. Some of the writings of Strauss appear sinister indeed. Have his followers put our democracy at risk?

Strauss is complex, and to select only those writings that can form a rationale for evildoing and then apply them to anyone who studied under him is a bit disingenuous. Besides, many other philosophers provide fodder for those who will do wrong.

But I bring up Strauss, and the powerful men in public office who studied under Strauss and his protégés, to show you that simply wanting to feel good about our political systems, wanting to trust and have faith, is not always wise. While you are feeling comfortably safe, someone may very well be out there rationalizing the elitism and greed that can eliminate your freedom. Whatever your opinions on current political figures, our founding fathers would tell you to expect and prepare for usurpation of power by people who care not a fig about your comfort. It is not inconceivable that at some point, someone in

power will believe that his agenda is more important than your vote.

It's just a matter of time, our founders said, before you'll need to rein in your leaders. Thomas Jefferson, especially, foresaw many of the dangers we face today and exhorted us toward constant vigilance:

“Unless the mass retains sufficient control over those entrusted with the powers of their government, these will be perverted to their own oppression, and to the perpetuation of wealth and power in the individuals and their families selected for the trust.”

—Thomas Jefferson to M. van der Kemp, 1812

“No other depositories of power [but the people themselves] have ever yet been found, which did not end in converting to their own profit the earnings of those committed to their charge.”

— Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, 1816

“If once [the people] become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, Judges and Governors, shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions.”

— Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington, 1787

“[We] should look forward to a time, and that not a distant one, when corruption in this as in the country from which we derive our origin will have seized the heads of government and be spread by them through the body of the people; when they will purchase the voices of the people and make them pay the price. Human nature is the same on every side of the Atlantic and will be alike influenced by the same causes.”

— Thomas Jefferson: Notes on Virginia Q.XIII, 1782

“How long we can hold our ground, I do not know. We are not incorruptible; on the contrary, corruption is making sensible though silent progress.”

— Thomas Jefferson, 1799

Maybe you have never written a letter to your legislator. Perhaps you think that no matter what you do, they'll just do what they want

anyway. But can you live with yourself if you do nothing? And what legacy will you leave your children? Later chapters focus on practical activism; this section is about your responsibility to engage.

Our founders did not promise to be the caretakers for their gift of democracy to us. They told us that if we don't feed it, our democracy will die. They warned us that it would get sick sometimes and explained that it was up to us to administer the right medicine.

If things are not going right, let your elected officials know. If you have to, remind them that they'll soon need to return to you for a vote. What good is your voice if you don't use it? If you believe that government has taken the wrong course, educate your legislators, and if they won't listen, throw them out and elect someone who promises a revision of the course. If you conclude, after reading this book, that your vote might not be counted correctly, then you have decisions to make.

Why vote? Is your country what you want, or is it becoming something else? Do you feel your vote is in danger? What would the founders of this country ask you to do? Will you choose to engage?

“The liberties of our country, the freedom of our civil Constitution, are worth defending at all hazards; and it is our duty to defend them against all attacks. We have received them as a fair inheritance from our worthy ancestors: they purchased them for us with toil and danger and expense of treasure and blood, and transmitted them to us with care and diligence. It will bring an everlasting mark of infamy on the present generation, enlightened as it is, if we should suffer them to be wrested from us by violence without a struggle, or to be cheated out of them by the artifices of false and designing men.”

— Samuel Adams

“Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

— Declaration of Independence