

# Inquiring Minds

## July 13, 2018

### Moderator: Melissa Butler

## Voting, Part I: Privilege, Right, Responsibility?

The US ranks very near the bottom of OECD countries in voter turnout. Is our low participation rate a bad or good thing? Some countries (e.g., Belgium, Australia) treat voting as a responsibility of citizenship and require their citizens to vote. Should the US do that?

The rules for voting are (mostly) set by the states and in recent years some states have experimented with rules geared to increase voter participation (e.g. same-day registration, motor-voter registration, vote-by-mail, early voting) while other states have introduced rules geared to reduce it (voter ID laws, reduced voting hours, reduced number of polling places). Setting aside partisan motivations that may be behind these moves, do you think the country would be better served by making it easier to vote?

In comparison with other countries, the US generally makes it more difficult to vote—putting the burden on the citizen to “self-initiate” their registration to vote (rather than putting the onus on the state to ensure that voters are registered). Americans vote on Tuesdays—not a weekend or holiday. Should the government do more to facilitate citizen participation?

Finally, is voting a privilege that should be available only to those who’ve never run afoul of the law, or should felons who’ve served their time and returned to society again be able to exercise the right to vote?

#### **Arguments for adult suffrage:**

- (1) The source of sovereignty is the people and thus every adult should be given the right to vote.
- (2) Everybody is equally affected by the laws and policies of the state. Therefore, everybody should have the right to elect his or her representative.
- (3) All are equal. Those who do not take any part in politics are not taken much care of by the government. Thus for the protection of the interests of all, everybody should be given the right to vote.
- (4) Adult suffrage gives some representation to the minorities. Thus there is no need of giving them separate representation.
- (5) Adult suffrage is the best way of differentiating citizens from aliens.

(6) It enhances the prestige of the people in society, because big leaders come to them for securing votes.

(7) For the protection of civil rights, it is essential that the people should be given political rights, so that the government should not try to crush the liberty of the people.

(8) Elections bring about political awakening in society. In order to shake off political disinterestedness from the society, it is essential that every citizen should be given the right to vote.

(9) Adult suffrage imparts political education to the people and their interest is created in the government.

### **Why everyone should be allowed to vote**

08/13/13 07:17 PM

By [Krystal Ball](#)

Eric Holder, made news on Monday, when he called for a more humane and a more pragmatic approach to criminal justice saying in part: "As a society, we pay much too high a price whenever our system fails to deliver outcomes that deter and punish crime, keep us safe, and ensure that those who have paid their debts have the chance to become productive citizens."

Here here. Those reforms will not only save us money, they will keep us safer because we all benefit when those who break our laws can be rehabilitated and reintegrated into our society. We all benefit when we treat those who break our laws as citizens and human beings rather than just as criminals.

And yet, for millions who have served their debt to society, there is no possibility of reintegration, no possibility of feeling like a full citizen with a real stake in our democracy because that most cherished and basic democratic right..the right to vote...has been permanently stripped away from them.

Thirty-five states restrict the voting rights of people who were previously incarcerated, leading to the disenfranchisement of 5.3 million people. It won't surprise you to learn that the impact of this disenfranchisement falls most heavily on men of color. In fact, across the country, 13% of black men have lost their right to vote. Just as racial profiling and harsh mandatory minimum sentencing tears at the fabric of our communities, denying access to the ballot to millions leads to a sense that they are not full members of our nation.

Here too though, we are seeing a shift in mindset, even among Republicans. My home state of Virginia has historically had one of the worst records on allowing convicted felons to vote. Virginia mandates a two-year waiting period before felons can even apply for restoration of their voting rights. To his credit, Gov. Bob McDonnell has used his executive authority to automate the restoration of voting rights for most non-violent felons, a move that could restore the right to vote to over 100,000 people. This is an important step forward. It is only a first step, not the final one.

How must it feel to know that you are not permitted to exercise your basic right and responsibility as a citizen of this country? How would it change YOUR mindset to be living in a country that thought so little of you, that you're not even allowed to cast a ballot and raise your small voice in our great democracy? It's

tough to imagine. Here's what Linda Steele says about how empowering it was for her to have her voting rights restored:

*I've been battling substance abuse for 30 years and have been in and out of prison all of my life. But I've been out, and clean, for more than four years. My life has completely changed. And on Nov. 4, with millions of Americans, I had a say about what happens in our country. There were tears in my eyes as I waited to vote. I felt like I was finally a productive member of society. I've never before felt like I could make a difference in terms of what happens around me. But I walked out of the polling place on Election Day feeling like I mattered, that I made a difference. I realized how far I've come. Amazing.*

Amazing indeed, Linda. We need more stories like that. We're on the march, but that march has a long way to go.

## SHOULD ALL CITIZENS BE ALLOWED TO VOTE?

02/12/2014

D.B. Ganz | Author, Uncommon Sense

Ask this question to almost anyone, and the resounding answer will be something like: "Yes! It is the American Way. 'One person, one vote' is the cornerstone of democracy."

Just how deep this sentiment runs can be seen in the recent protests against policies requiring all voters to first produce a photo ID. The protesters seem to feel that any restriction on the unimpeded access to voting undermines our very democracy.

I support voter ID laws. Without them, a single person could theoretically cast many votes during one Election Day by going to different polling stations; the fraud potential is enormous. If there are people too poor to procure an ID, the small amount of money needed for this purpose should be provided, either by government or private charities.

Though politically incorrect to the extreme, a more fundamental question, I believe, is whether all American citizens, even those with proper IDs, should be automatically permitted to vote in major elections, such as for Congress and the presidency. I raise this issue haltingly, for I recognize the potential for danger whenever government deprives people of their rights. I also feel profound respect and gratitude toward the American practice of all people always being allowed to vote.

Nevertheless, there are valid democratic considerations for why all people should not necessarily be allowed to vote. At the very least, this issue should be publicly aired and debated.

Imagine a team of hospital oncologists agonizing over how to best treat a heretofore unseen type of cancer. Would they put the matter to a vote of the

hospital's secretaries? Of course not! And this is not discriminatory. Clearly, such medical decisions where lives hang in the balance should only be made by those who understand the relevant scientific and medical issues.

When casting a vote in a major election, choices must be made between different positions on life or death matters of national security, for example, whether to bomb Iran, which currently poses a potential nuclear threat. Also at issue are the differing approaches to dealing with the huge and ever-increasing national debt that could destroy the U.S. economy and render its currency worthless. Voters must also respond to the current tendency of government to abuse personal freedoms, as witnessed in the recent IRS scandal.

Yet, many of the Americans casting votes on these weighty matters are appallingly ignorant of the issues they are deciding upon.

An October, 2013 Cato Institute article titled "Democracy and Political Ignorance" reported, regarding Obamacare, that: "Some 80 percent (of the U.S. public) say they have heard 'nothing at all' or 'only a little' about the controversial insurance exchanges that are a major part of the law." The article also mentioned that: "Most of the public has very little idea of how federal spending is actually distributed. They greatly underestimate the percentage that goes to entitlement programs such as Medicare and Social Security, and vastly overestimate that spent on foreign aid. Public ignorance is not limited to information about specific policies. It also extends to the basic structure of government and how it operates. A 2006 survey found that only 42 percent can even name the three branches of the federal government: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial."

A 2011 article in the Daily Mail reported that 70 percent of all Americans do not know what the Constitution is and 29 percent cannot name the Vice President.

Isn't it reasonable, then, to propose that the U.S. require all voters, irrespective of race, education, or income level, to first pass a basic exam on the issues of the day and the makeup of the U.S. government? This would not be an exercise in depriving anybody of their right to vote. Rather, it would be a case of making the entirely reasonable demand that voters know the rudiments of what they are voting upon.

Certainly, every effort should be made to educate the uninformed so they can pass a voting competency test. Free course materials should be available online, in libraries, and so forth. But until people pass that test, they would be disqualified from voting.

There is a final argument I would like to make on this topic. People might reject this article's proposal as being inconsiderate or elitist, for it would deprive many honorable Americans of their right to vote, at least until they know the issues. (I don't see it that way at all. The intention is to create informed voters, not to stop anyone from voting.)

I feel, however, that U.S. law must also be considerate toward all parties – including those who do understand the issues they are voting on. Returning to the example of Iran, if knowledgeable voters opt for a certain Iran policy, it is because they judge that such will best protect their lives.

It is thus terribly unfair to the responsible voters for such a decision to be made in part by people who don't know whether Iran is a city, a country, a continent, or a private warlord. The disregard for the public's safety inherent in accepting such ignorant votes is akin to having the secretaries determining the courses of treatment for a hospital's cancer patients.

During a Little League game, whether a pitch is called a ball or a strike can only be determined by an umpire who understands baseball. Shouldn't the same standard of integrity apply as well to the voters who decide on the weighty and complex issues that are always being confronted during major elections?

### **Arguments against Universal Adult Suffrage:**

(1) Sir Henry Maine was of the view that it would hinder the scientific development of the country.

(2) Lecky pointed out the dangers of government run by ignorant masses and pleaded for a suffrage, based partly upon education and property. The legislature is essentially a machine for levying taxes and it should be chosen by an electorate restricted mainly to those who pay the taxes. Lecky further said that one of the great questions of politics which is going to arise in our day is whether as a last resort, the world should be governed by its ignorance or intelligence.

The idea that the ultimate source of power should belong to the poorest, the most ignorant, the most incapable who are necessarily the most numerous, is a theory which assuredly reverses all the past experiences of mankind.

(3) Franchise is a sacred national duty and it should not be misused. If every adult is given the franchise right, very few intelligent persons shall misuse it.

(4) The capitalists purchase the votes from the poor people and the laborers. Thus it is not proper to give the right to vote to everyone.

(5) The questions relating to administration are becoming complex day by day. An ordinary voter is incapable of understanding complete questions. Thus he elects understanding representatives