

Pilot, or Autopilot?

Over-exercising the right not to vote

By Mark David Richards

Americans think voting is the right thing to do. But rarely do more than half actually vote. The other half doesn't register its opinions about who should hold the most important leadership positions in American democracy—the elected positions held by citizens.

The most basic measure of democracy is the right to elect one's representatives. After years of civil rights struggles, virtually all American citizens have the right to vote—regardless of race, color, creed, or gender.

Those who don't have full voting rights want them. Take the District of Columbia, where citizens have been struggling for nearly two centuries to gain equal voting rights. Because citizens who are born or move there don't live in a state, they don't have the right to vote in congressional elections. For these citizens, it is a constant source of demoralization and indignation.

Like these DC residents, most Americans do seem to value their vote. In 1998, a nationally representative survey of the US electorate by the National Election Studies (NES) found that 86% believed having elections makes the government pay at least some attention to what the people think—this compares favorably with a finding of 90% in 1964. However, people also seem to think the value of the vote has eroded: in 1998, only 45% said elections makes the government pay a good deal of attention—down from 65% in 1964.

The US has one of the lowest participation rates of democracies worldwide.

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In 1996, 49% voted for President—the lowest turnout since 1924. In 1998, 33% voted for congressional representatives. And, in the 2000 contest, only half of eligible voters cast a ballot, despite the closeness of the race for President. Contrast that to Denmark, Italy, and Germany where, on average, over 80% of citizens vote.

Some nations have laws requiring citizens to go to the polls. But Americans have the right not to vote, and many exercise that right for a variety of reasons. Some view those who do not vote as generally satisfied with the political status quo. Others see declining participation as a sign of alienation.

In fact, many are cynical. In January 1999, a survey conducted by the Center on Policy Attitudes found that 75% of US adults felt the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for them-

selves. While 81% thought the nation would be better off if leaders followed the views of the public more closely, 63% thought people in government do not understand what most Americans think. And from NES, the proportion of those who agreed that "Public officials don't care much what people like me think" was 62%—that's up from 35% in 1952.

The Center for Voting and Democracy held an essay contest in which they asked young people, "What changes in our electoral system would increase political participation by young people and why is that important to you and people like you?" There were 9,000 entries. Leila Rouhi, the grand prize winner, wrote, "Political inactivity on the part of young Americans stems from one fundamental source—a general cynicism of the American political process. The disdain for politics is further perpetuated

by a lack of voter education and a needlessly archaic voting procedure that creates barriers to voting where they need not exist.”

This assessment was supported by a June 2000 survey by the Pew Research Center, which specified the reasons people don't vote: 72% sometimes don't like any of the candidates, 64% said they sometimes don't know enough about the candidates, 47% said they can make more of a difference by getting involved in their communities than by voting in elections, and 36% didn't want to involve themselves with politics. A substantial number said it's difficult for them to get out to the polls (26%), although few said it was too complicated to register where they live (13%). The study also found that many Americans arrive at the voting booth unprepared. About half (47%) agreed they sometimes vote for candidates without really knowing enough about them.

And no wonder Americans are feeling they don't know enough. They're less interested and paying less attention. Pew found 38% interested in politics, down from 55% at the same time in the presidential election campaign eight years earlier. In another poll by Project Vote Smart, only 45% of adults 26 and older and 26% of 18 to 25 year olds said they pay a lot of attention to the national government and politics.

What kind of information do people say they need to help make a good decision? In the Pew survey, three items stood out: a candidate's reputation for honesty (84%), how well a candidate connects with average people (67%), and a candidate's voting record or policy positions in public offices he or she has previously held (60%).

Thanks to the closely contested presidential election this year, many have an increased sense that their vote matters. A post-election Pew Research Center survey of

US voters found that this election increased the belief among 74% that every vote counts. A *Washington Post/ABC News* poll that asked if respondents were more or less likely to vote in the 2004 presidential election in view of what had happened in 2000 found 66% saying they were more likely to vote.

Pew also found that 68% were satisfied with the choice of candidates, and 83% said they had learned enough to make an informed choice. Where did they get their information? Mostly from television (70%), but also from newspapers (39%), and radio (15%). Most reported that candidate commercials were not helpful (66%).

But again, almost half of Americans did not vote. Many who wrote essays for the Center for Voting and Democracy expressed anger and distrust of the political system and asked, “Why should we be involved?” Some said the system is for the privileged and the rich—and they don't want to give leaders the right to claim allegiance or support. But those who do not participate are no less responsible for the outcomes than those who do participate. If citizens don't maintain and use the structures within which democracy is expressed, and demand accountability of their leaders, the outcome may be highly undemocratic, that is, *not the will of the majority*.

The American experiment in self-rule can only be sustained if its citizens retain faith that elections are fair, and participate. Politics is not a dirty word, and most who practice the art are honorable. The more citizens are involved in public affairs, the more they learn about the issues and teach one another, and the more likely they are to vote and even help someone run for office. Leaders learn by experience—by getting involved with a citizens' group or political parties or running for the school board or other local elected positions.

Many who gain experience at the local level get elected to state legislatures, and to Congress.

But in some parts of the country there aren't enough citizens willing to run for office. In 1998, 22 Virginia towns didn't have enough candidates to fill council seats; three didn't have candidates for mayor. In 1998, NES found that only 5% attended political meetings, rallies, dinners, or such; only 2% worked for one of the parties or candidates. Why? Perhaps the demands and personal costs of running for public office are too high. Perhaps it is too difficult to represent the many and conflicting viewpoints.

Political parties and civic groups could involve more people—many citizens appreciate the opportunity to meet new people and work on issues they care about. But only 27% report having been called or talked to by either major party (although this is up from 17% in 1956).

Americans must not take their right to vote for granted, for it is their safety net. Thomas Jefferson wrote, “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.”

The more citizens opt out, the greater the likelihood that a small organized faction will win an election and control the many. An uninvolved citizenry can result in the loss of precious rights and liberties. And in many cases, elections are determined by a few hundred votes—even in the highest office of the land, as we all now know. So let no one be fooled into thinking his or her vote—or voice—is meaningless. In the end, it is up to each and every American to decide whether to seek out information and voice an opinion about who should lead—or skip elections and remain on autopilot. ●