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Democracy Promotion Begins at Home

BY NICHOLAS ROMANOW on NOVEMBER 6, 2018 • (2)

As the polls open for early voting, the classic “I voted” stickers serve as a reminder of American civic duty, or the lack thereof. Bemoaning low voter participation is a tried and true American pastime. Yet, the most unrelenting aspect of this phenomenon is the chronic inaction by elected officials. In these midterm elections, no major candidate has made voter enfranchisement a key campaign issue. The landmark Voting Rights Act is over 50 years old, and still no recent administration has passed major federal legislation to update our elections system and address America’s consistently abysmal voter turnout.

Meanwhile, United States foreign policy sputters from one crisis to the next, unable to control a cascade of human rights calamities from Asia to the Middle East and even into Europe. For the first time in recent history, the number of democracies worldwide has [begun to decline](#) . This should be alarming. Democracies tend to avoid war against each other, build cooperative political and economic ties with other states, and are typically more stable than autocracies that rely on sustained repression. Fewer democracies in the world will threaten the longevity of our own; it’s about time we started to promote democracy here at home.

The horrid statistics that reveal the United States’ poor voter participation are repeated so often that they seem to have lost their shock-inducing effect. However, this must not prevent serious discussion or attempts to solve the problem. Compared to other wealthy, mature democracies, Americans vote at drastically lower rates: [barely half](#) of eligible Americans voted in 2016. And, presidential elections typically generate higher turnout than off-year elections like this year’s midterms. While blaming the youth is as tired as lamenting low turnout, the fact remains that youth disengagement doesn’t bode well for the future. Only [28 percent of millennials](#) intend to vote, compared to 74 percent of seniors.

Young Americans’ refusal to vote is only a symptom of a deeper, scarier problem. Polling data suggests that younger generations place little value in living under a democratic system. One study produced by researchers at Harvard found that only 19 percent of American millennials [reject the idea of a military takeover](#) of government. If this soun alarmist, good. Dissatisfaction with democracy should be a clear warning to leaders who will only become more unpopular as the democratic system continues to be challenged and questioned. The common citizen today observes a perversion of democracy that might justify the widespread apathy. Run-away [campaign spending](#) , convoluted voting restrictions, and [meticulously engineered partisan districts](#) provide ample fuel for the idea that one’s vote doesn’t matter. With such entrenched obstructions, voter apathy should come as no surprise.

Ideally, this problematic situation should compel Congress and the executive to act on the fundamental issues that impede the legitimacy of the American model around the world. Simply put, the United States can’t credibly tackle corruption abroad when political influence in America is inextricably tied to personal wealth. Our diplomats cannot champion free and fair elections when Congressional districts are [drawn to guarantee certain results](#). International civil society groups face difficulty in pursuing their core mission when political apathy is endemic here at home. For all the lip service paid to the “shining light upon a hill,” politicians have taken appallingly little action to keep that flame



Academic – ish.

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Fixes to campaign finance and gerrymandering may be nearly out of reach within the current political climate. Although, one way we can rectify poor governance is by addressing broken elections. The primary system has proven to be a boon to radicals who are more invested in martyrdom than pragmatism. Campaigns are executed like war plans, including character assassinations, fearmongering, and appeals to outrage. Moreover, winning elections has become distracted by amassing donations and endorsements instead of soliciting votes. Even after the ballots are counted, politicians continue their campaigns. Instead of [inspiring](#) the citizenry to a higher calling, contemporary politics now fixates on pandering and self-preservation.

Raising election participation should be a policy action item. Registration and voting both remain antiquated processes. While security concerns are legitimate, there must be a way to securely harness information technology in order to expand voter participation. If Americans consistently use the Internet for banking without constant fear of losing everything, there is no obvious reason why voter registration can't be digitized. Other crucial government activities take place in cyberspace, from paying taxes to applying for citizenship. Refusal to digitize voting intentionally ames the process more inefficient for citizens.

Yet what is most needed is a cultural shift. Surely, bad policy has been a strong determinant of an apathetic political culture. However, the true failure of leadership has been the festering of a winner-take-all culture. Desiring a less vitriolic and more productive political culture could be wishful thinking. However, no law can be passed to compel candidates to campaign on policy ideas or show basic respect to opponents. Some active measures to restore collegiality could positively enhance the dialogue, such as a joint campaign tour discussed in both [1964](#) and [2008](#).

Maybe once politicians become accountable to more than a mere half of the American public, they will at long last be compelled to confront the fundamental flaws in our political system. Whether or not leaders will change their tenor, the status quo is untenable. If a majority of the public does not participate in government, by definition, that government cannot be classified as a democracy. At best, that is an oligarchy. Regardless of whether non-voters are lazy, disenfranchised, ignorant, or morally derelict, there can be no democracy without the input of the majority.

For this reason, voter participation is vital to our democracy. We hear that repeated time and time again because it is fundamentally true. Progress is only possible when everyone's voice is heard, and we cannot hope to solve our problems when decisions are made solely by the passionate and interested. Real change comes from compromise and accountability, both of which must be driven by a diverse, complete electorate. But most importantly, our democracy's shortcomings provide undue comfort for autocrats around the world. Yet, reinvigorating our democracy to make it better than ever can spark a new wave of democratization in an age of deep anxiety. To make the world safe for democracy once again, we should start right here at home.

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