

The Passy Press

Letter to the Editor

From: Peter M. Barnet pmbarnet@undisclosed.com
To: Nick Gardiner enpg@thepassypress.com
Sent: Oct 8, 2016 at 3:26 PM,
Subject: Mandatory Voting by George Cadwalader

This is a marvelous essay and proposal. Mr. Cadwalader makes a compelling case for mandatory voting fully aware of its slim chances of happening today. Yet one has to start somewhere to untangle the political and electoral mess we have been drifting into (made worse by recent miss-guided Supreme Court decisions such as Citizens United which empowered special interests and Shelby which weakened voting rights protection for minority Americans.) Mandatory voting goes to the heart of the problem.

We all know liberal democracy is under stress everywhere today but nowhere is voter apathy more pronounced than in the United States. Interestingly, one of the great debates at the 1787 Constitutional Convention concerned how much voting power to give the people. Those who feared too much power argued that the average man would not be adequately informed to make a knowledgeable voting decision. They largely overcame these fears but never thought that most citizens would not even care enough to vote, let alone cast an ignorant one.

American politics has been a continuous debate over the role of government in people's lives. Americans have always defined freedom as freedom from government and the debate has been how big or small government should be

Therefore, it is not surprising that so few citizens vote. Also it should not be surprising how badly uninformed is the average citizen. Frank Bruni, NY Times columnist, in a recent article titled "The Dumbing Down of American Democracy" points out that only 40% of citizens can name the three branches of government and most could not pass the citizen test administered to applying immigrants. Apathy enhances ignorance and is every bit as corrosive as special interests are to democracy.

Yale law professor, Bruce Ackerman has written that our primary system (only fifty years old,) has increased the risk of the US electing an autocrat because only the most committed and often extreme Americans vote in primaries. To wit, this year less than 30 million out of an expected 165 million electorate selected Clinton and Trump. Mandatory voting probably would not have resulted in Trump and Clinton would have won easily against Sanders.

Whether citizens do not vote because they do not care, or feel their vote does not count in a special interest system or because they feel the political establishment has failed them, they weaken democracy by their apathy. This has to change.

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On the eve of the Constitutional Convention, George Washington said that people would not vote for what is good for them without coercion from government. Mandatory voting is such coercion and could serve the greater good of a better-educated and involved electorate.

Bravo for George Cadwalader to propose this knowing that it is a long shot today but maybe not tomorrow.

Sincerely,

Peter

Peter Barnet has been an Associate Professor of Global Communications, at the American University of Paris and former EVP and Chief Client Officer at Young & Rubicam. He is a resident of Paris and a graduate of Yale College.