

THE CASE AGAINST COMPULSORY VOTING: WHY CONSCRIPT THE UNINFORMED?

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I've been a fan of U.S. politics since 1965 or 1966 when, shortly after it came out in paperback, my father gave me Ted Sorensen's JFK biography, *Kennedy*, for Christmas or my birthday. (That was the complete title: Books didn't have baroque subtitles in those days.) A quarter century or so later one of the great thrills of my life was meeting Sorensen at a dinner party in New York.

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I've followed U.S. politics pretty closely ever since reading that very inspiring book. Several years after we were married my wife confided that she'd thought it strange on first meeting me that my Sunday morning devotional was to watch the political interview shows, *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation*, and the like—the ones

Donald Trump says he gets many of his policy ideas from.

When kids came along I gave up that habit but with them off to university I'm getting back to my old habit and I have certainly been watching the candidate debates pretty faithfully, including healthy (or maybe unhealthy!) chunks of all 36—yes, 36!—Republican and Democratic debates and town halls.

The length and expense of the modern U.S. presidential campaign come in for lots of criticism from foreigners, including Canadians. For that matter, they come in for lots of criticism from Americans, too. One obvious drawback is that a candidate has to start running at least two years before the final vote and then campaign and fundraise more or less flat-out, full-time.

On the other hand, a very big benefit is that voters get to know the candidates and see how they behave



during the little crises that come up from time to time during the course of a campaign. And though it doesn't necessarily follow that a candidate that can't run a successful campaign couldn't run a successful government, it doesn't necessarily not.

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There have been problems with the debate structures and rules and, this year in particular, with the comportment of the debaters, at least on the Republican side. But there has also been considerable variety in the debates, which are

organized in a decentralized way we Canadians experienced for the first time during the last federal election but which congenital centralizers seem likely to outlaw in favour of much more heavily regulated procedures, as is too frequently our national instinct. All that aside, any American who doesn't by now have a reasonably clear opinion of the five surviving major party candidates just hasn't been paying attention.

The funny thing about my great interest in U.S. politics is that I don't vote. Every four years I invest tens, maybe even hundreds of hours watching and reading even though, not being American, I don't have a ballot to cast. I suspect lots of Canadians are like me. By contrast,


tens of millions of Americans, the surveys and vote-counts demonstrate, don't pay attention, aren't very well-informed about the candidates or issues, and in the end don't vote.

And yet you regularly hear people recommend that democracies in which voter turnout is low, such as the U.S., such as Canada, should institute compulsory voting, which would require people to either show up at their polling station and cast or spoil a ballot, or instead pay a fine of \$20 or \$25.

I've never understood why we would want to do this. If people prefer not to vote or just can't be bothered, why is that not their right? Part of being free is being free not to participate in the democratic process if you

don't want to. Those of us who stay away in our droves from the public consultations on this project or that, which now run almost 24/7, exercise a similar right of non-participation. In the case of voting, you might think not participating is in bad taste, given the effort many of our forebears put into acquiring the vote for us. But freedom isn't worth much if you can only exercise it in ways none of your peers objects to.

More fundamentally, why would we want to force people who are disinclined to vote to come out to the polling station and record some sort of preference? A stock person-in-the-street interview around voting time is to ask people about who's running or what the issues are. No doubt many people answer sensibly. They don't get broadcast, of course. Who does get broadcast are the alarming number of people who betray almost complete ignorance about even the most basic facts of the campaign or our electoral system.

My guess is that such people are disproportionately non-voters. Why we should seek out their participation in a process many of us do see as consequential I'm afraid I will never understand. 

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