

VOTING IS FOR EVERYONE

BY BOB ZASLAVSKY

When Mark Taylor recently dragged his political ads into the mud of sophistry and misrepresentation (and Cathy Cox felt forced to follow suit), one knew that the primary election was imminent.

When Ralph Reed emerged out of the shadows of corruption and hypocrisy to advertise himself as the shining knight of Christian virtue, one knew that the primary election was imminent.

When Sonny Perdue (in collusion with lily-livered legislators of both political parties) threatened to call a special session of the legislature to protect the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, one knew that this was a general election year.

We are in the midst of the flood of pandering to irrationality and irresponsibility that has become the hallmark of our elections, especially in the last half-century.

And this is all designed to capture votes. But whose votes? And the votes of how many of us? These are critically important questions that should not be dismissed with flip cynicism, even if one acknowledges that the temptation to abstain from the electoral process is almost irresistible.

That temptation must be resisted. Voting, the most massive expression of what the Founders called “the consent of the governed,” is what makes our system of government democratic. What Ishmael said of life aboard the Pequod is true of American democracy as a whole: it is “a joint stock company” in which each of us has a “Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals” (Melville, *Moby Dick*, ch. 72).

The voter in this country has become an endangered species. In the last hundred years, the percentage of eligible voters who voted in the general election has exceeded sixty percent only four times (1952, 1960, 1964, 1968). Primary elections are far worse.

In most other democracies, the voter turnout is 75 percent and above. Voter turnout in the US general elections ranks next to last among the twenty-one long-standing democracies in the world—only Switzerland is lower—and even precarious neonatal democracies have far higher voter turnout than we do.

We need to recall the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who understood the vision of the Founders far better than many contemporary commentators do. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson said, “the great man is he who in the midst of a crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” And in *Resistance to Civil Government* (sometimes called *Civil Disobedience*), Thoreau said, “Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.” Emerson and Thoreau realized that the purpose of democracy (and democratic participation) is not to allow the loud vocal majority to dominate, but rather to ensure that the silent minorities will not go unheard. So, even if every vote seems not to count, every vote matters. At one time, those who advocated universal suffrage, suffrage for blacks, suffrage for women began as silent minorities and persisted until their silence became too deafening to ignore.

Everyone’s vote matters. All efforts to encourage the disaffected to vote should be applauded, not denigrated.

And to those who fear that maximizing the vote will lead to elections in which incompetent voters elect incompetent officeholders, I can only reply that if our current crop of officials is due to a small, interested electorate, unleashing the unwashed multitude could not result in a worse or more incompetent officialdom than we have now.

We should encourage everyone to vote because with respect to the quality of our legislators, we have nowhere to go but up.

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