

Collin Obremski

Compiled, Researched, and Written for John Kenworthy

Jamie Hamilton

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## Changing the Way We Vote

### INTRODUCTION/THE PROBLEM

According to the Washington Post, the 2004 U.S. elections had the highest voter turnout since 1968. A whopping 60.7% of eligible voters went out to vote. It's interesting to put this in comparison with the amount of people who went and voted for the recent elections in Iraq. According to the San Diego Union Tribune, 58% of eligible voters went to the polls. This was amidst the death threats by extremist groups to make the voters blood "fill the streets". When comparing the percentage voting turnouts of both nations, they are shockingly very close. One nation has experienced the freedom of democratic voting for 230 years with the other just beginning. Many would say the lackluster amount of U.S. votes is due to people taking for granted the freedoms they been blessed with, others would say the problem goes much deeper.

Many of you in the room fall into the age category of 18-24. According to recent research done by the University of Maryland, 47% of you turned out to vote during the presidential elections. What about the older folks? Well, about 55% of people in their mid twenties to thirties voted as well as about 65-70% of people in their mid thirties to mid fifties respectively.

What's interesting is that the statistic for 18-24 year olds is *up* 11% from the 2000 presidential elections. That means that in the 2000 presidential elections, only 36% of people 18-24 voted. That may be shocking to some of you, but for most, probably not.

Many people, especially those 18-24, don't vote mainly because they just don't care. However, many people don't vote because they come up with an excuse not to. It's quite common to hear from someone: "I'm too busy", or even more advanced reasoning such as, "All politicians are corrupt" or "there's not much to choose from". Even though these are excuses, they might actually have some validity to them. Probably not that *all* politicians are corrupt, but maybe that people believe the one's they have to choose from are? Could it possibly be that the way the system of voting is the eventual reason that people in the United States don't vote?

Many people are not voting, period; when they do, the way that the current voting system is set up bogs the whole process down. Some people are unable to go to the polls on Election Day while others are unaware of their options. Since the 2000 presidential election, many wonder if their vote even counts at all. Though some progress has been made in the area of representative democratic voting, much more can be done to insure the saying "one person, one vote"

## THE CAUSE

The United States is a nation built on democracy, a system that is built to allow everyone to have an equal voice in shaping policy. There are two forms of democracy, direct and representative. A direct democracy is a political system that allows citizens to vote on all major laws and policy. With the U.S. containing states with lots of people, direct democracy is not an option. Therefore, we vote and elect people as representatives to act in the people's interest. With that being said, all citizens of the United States who are 18 or older are given the constitutional right and privilege to vote for those who will make the laws and run the country.

During the 2004 presidential elections, a common saying by people was that they were voting for "the less of two evils". People said this because they knew that they really only had two people to choose from for president. It's not that other people weren't running for president, it's just that the way the system works has only allowed for those in the two large political parties to have a chance. This mindset is not only in presidential elections. Recently, during local and state elections, voters really only had two choices, democrat or republican. Many feel like neither political parties represent them very well, so they either don't vote or cast their vote for a third party candidate that has no chance in getting elected. Others end up voting for someone they believe to be "the lesser of two evils". This seems to almost go against the ideals of representative democracy and makes the current system of voting out of date.

Talking about dates, let's look at the Electoral College. Let me first explain what the Electoral College is. According to HowStuffWorks.com the Electoral College is the

way in which the President of the United States is elected into office. Each state has a number of electors equal to the number of its U.S. senators plus the number of its U.S. representatives, which varies according to the state's population. While many people of the U.S. think they are voting for the president and vice-president, they are actually voting for an elector that will cast a vote for that presidential candidate in the electoral college. Therefore, every political party running for presidency in every state has electors that can cast a vote for the president.

This system was created by the fathers of the United States in the constitution. It was originally put in place as a compromise of two arguments; one side believed that having a vote entirely decided by the number of people voting, a popular vote, was too irresponsible. The other side thought that giving congress complete control of choosing the president was not a good idea. Therefore, the electoral college was put into place to be a sort of “go-between” for both arguments. This compromise has changed over the years, but is still largely the same. It was evident in the 2000 presidential election that the existence of this system today leaves many people scratching their heads. Many people question the system when a president is elected into office with less popular vote than his competitor.

Even when it comes down to the state level and voting, many are left bewildered by seemingly out of date voting methods. States are simply not implementing new types of voting methods. The current set up of the “two-party” system practically gives no chance to other political parties running for office. For example, let’s say you want to run to be your districts representative in the state House of Representatives. You are not a democrat or republican, but a Libertarian. You will be running against both a democrat

and a republican. Since representatives are chosen by the majority of the popular vote, you really will have no chance to be in the house. Even if 13% of the people voted for you, the majority would most likely go to someone in big parties. This way of voting can definitely be solved, and I will talk about that in a minute.

I've just talked about the reasons people give for not voting, the downfalls of the Electoral College, and also the downfalls of state and local level voting. Now I will talk about how we can solve these problems.

## THE SOLUTION

So how do we fix this? It first needs to start with the way in which people vote. in an interview by Christian Science Monitor with Charles Schumer, a New York Senator, he stated “The current [voting] system is antediluvian. We haven’t updated it in any significant way in years, and that’s one of the reasons why turnout had declined by nearly 20 percent since 1960”. Many voting places are still using 19<sup>th</sup> century technology for voting. The biggest example of old voting technology causing a lot of pain was during that infamous 2000 presidential election when there was a recount in Florida. Florida was using a “punch card ballot”, in which a voter poked through a perforated box for their candidate. This led to the question of whether voters actually completely punched out the piece of cardboard that they actually wanted to. This has led to a push for legislation to have national voting standards. According to the Orlando Sentinel, “the rush to electronic voting came after Congress pushed states and counties towards more modern balloting machines – methods not prone to embarrassing “hanging” or “pregnant” chads that for weeks tied up the presidency in piles of Florida’s old punch-card ballots.” Due to the troubles in Florida and other states, many have been moving to electronic voting systems at a very fast pace.

While the electronic voting system makes leaps and bounds over many old ways of voting, it’s opened a slew of issues itself. This rush to put electronic voting systems left one thing out... a paper trail. Without a printed receipt or record of the vote cast, it would be impossible to do a recount of votes with an electronic voting failure. What if a hard drive crashes? What if there’s a programming error? What if 300 votes somehow

turn into 4,000? An electronic voting machine with no paper trail makes it impossible to do a ballot-by-ballot recount like in the 2000 elections. Legislation must be put into place to a national standard of e-ballot paper trail. Nevertheless, once this system is standardized and trustworthy, voting will be extremely accurate.

All of this talk of hanging chads leads me to the whole picture of the Presidential Election. I've already talked about the Electoral College and its formation, but here's a little more information on why it was created. According to Christian Science Monitor, "founding father James Madison argued that the Electoral College would ensure that small states had a role in federal elections – and that Southern states were not disadvantaged by the North's 'disproportion of qualified voters,' otherwise known as slaves. So one reason for the formation of the Electoral College was that the south was worried that in a popular vote election, the north would have overwhelmed the south with their slave votes. With the help of the Electoral College, the south dominated early presidential races. It's also a theory that the founding fathers believed that commoners in remote towns wouldn't be sufficiently informed about their choices for president and needed representatives to do their voting for them. So they formed the Electoral College. But mass media has definitely changed people's ability to be informed.

Someone running for presidency can win the popular vote and still not win the presidency. This was shown in the 2000 presidential election where Al Gore won the popular vote but not the electoral college. For an American population that is majority-minded, it's hard to swallow. Every other election in the United States is done by popular election. All of the evidence and history for the Electoral College shows that it's an outdated system. It needs to be abolished. But, for this to happen, a constitutional

amendment must occur. For this to happen,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the states must approve of it. This hasn't happened yet. It's interesting to note that of the 11,000 constitutional amendments proposed over the past 200 years, this is the most frequent. What's keeping it from being amended or scrapped are the smaller states dominated by certain political parties. They get a larger voice than they would with popular vote and want to keep it that way.

So let's move from the national election to the local election. Remember when I talked about you being a Libertarian and having no chance of ever getting a seat in the state House of Representatives? Well... I would like to look into a way that would reform the "winner takes all" way in which our voting system is aligned. A replacement to this limited choice electoral system is proportional representation. According to Social Policy magazine, "The principle of proportional representation, in essence, is that parties or blocs of likeminded voters should win seats in legislative assemblies in proportion to their share of the popular vote. In proportional representative systems, voters in each district are represented by several elected officials rather than just one, as in winner-take-all, one-seat district systems used in most US elections." Winner take all systems allow 51 percent of voters to win 100 percent of the representation.

While this system still ensures that the majority vote will earn the majority of seats, it also insures that the minority will receive their share of the elections. So for you, the Libertarian who ran against the Democrat and Republican, you would have your chance at the house. However, the only way for this to be possible would be to make voting districts much larger. For example, we in Howard County instead of voting for one representative for one district, we would vote for many representatives for one large

district. Therefore, if your party received 10%, the democrats 50%, and the republicans 40% of the vote, you would get 10% of the representatives in the large district. You'd still be outnumbered, but at least you would still have a voice.

As far as elections go, there's another way in which people are looking at voting. This would be in the form of ranked voting, also referred to as instant run-off voting. According to NPR's Morning Edition, ranked-choice voting system works like this: Voters will rank the candidates in their order of preference: one, two, three. The candidate with the majority of first-place votes wins. If no candidate receives an overall majority of first preferences the candidates with fewest votes are eliminated one by one, and their votes transferred according to their second and third preferences (and so on), until one candidate achieves a majority. It's kind of like a game of musical chairs and can completely change the face of elections. For example, if the 100,000 people who voted for Ralph Nader in Florida during the 2000 presidential elections would have voted with run-off voting, they most likely would have put Al Gore as a second choice. Thus, once Nader would have been knocked out, the votes from his ballots would have gone towards Gore. Which would have made Gore win Florida and also the 2000 presidential elections.

So far, we've looked at the new ways of electronic voting, the need for e-voting paper trails, the abolishment of the electoral college, proportional representation, and instant run-off voting. But what about those darned excuses that people make about being too busy to go vote. Well don't worry... people are looking into ways of making that excuse obsolete. In a recent NPR interview with former President Jimmy Carter, he talks about making Election Day a national holiday. Carter stated, "We feel it's very

important for folks to have a chance to vote more widely on a holiday... and so we feel that election day should be made Veterans Day.” So, in effect, this would move Veterans Day to election day, thus making it a federal holiday. It would give people much more of a reason to vote. And as for it being during veteran’s day, isn’t the freedom to vote something that every American soldier has fought for since day one of the American Revolution? What a way to celebrate the freedom that our veterans have sacrificed so much for.

Many people are not voting, period; when they do, the way that the current voting system is set up bogs the whole process down. Some people are unable to go to the polls on Election Day while others are unaware of their options. Since the 2000 presidential election, many wonder if their vote even counts at all. Though some progress has been made in the area of representative democratic voting, much more can be done to insure the saying “one person, one vote”. The electoral college needs to be abolished, new ways of electronic voting need paper trails, we need to look enact new ways of voting through proportional representation and instant run-off voting, and we should make election day a national holiday. It will be a beautiful day when 90% of Americans go out to vote. That day will only come if our current system of voting changes.

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