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**Voter Participation: Moral Perspectives and Practical Suggestions**

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As citizens of the United States, we enjoy the right to vote and have the moral obligation to exercise this right responsibly. In the history of our country, suffrage, the right to vote, was originally restricted to white land-owning men, gradually became more inclusive. Starting in the 1820s states opened the vote to males of all economic levels; in 1870 the 15th Amendment gave black males the vote; in 1920 the 19th Amendment enfranchised women; in 1924 the Indian Citizenship Act effectively extended voting rights to many Native Americans; in 1965 the Voting Rights Act opened the ballot to more black southerners restricted by Jim Crow Laws; and in 1971, the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.

Many U.S. citizens do not exercise their right to vote. In the 2016 presidential election, for example, only about 58% of eligible voters actually cast ballots. Older Americans generally vote at a higher rate than younger Americans. In 2016, almost 71% of citizens over 65 voted, while only 46% of those 18 to 29 exercised their right. On a positive note, 53% of Americans voted in the 2018 midterm election, an historic 11% increase over 2014, with a striking 79% increase among the youngest cohort of voters. Despite this recent good news, it is still true that about 40% of American citizens do not vote, including over 70% of young persons. To put this in perspective, 42 countries have higher voting rates than the United States: for example, 76% of Germans and 66% of Canadians voted in their recent elections.

There are many reasons why American citizens do not exercise their right to vote. Hundreds of thousands are not eligible to vote because of their criminal record; for example, an estimated 10% of adults in Florida cannot vote because of felony convictions. American citizens in territories like Puerto Rico and Guam are not eligible to vote in our national elections. Many eligible voters, who would like to cast a ballot, including the millions of workers holding two jobs, cannot find time to vote since we hold elections on a workday and not on a weekend or a national holiday as many other countries do. Citizens who choose not to vote offer various reasons: my vote does not matter; the system is corrupt; neither candidate is acceptable; actual voting is too complicated and takes too much time and energy.

Some citizens find it harder to vote because of recent restrictive state laws. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 required states with a history of voter suppression of minorities to get federal approval to make changes in voter registration and voting procedures. In a 2014 decision, the Supreme Court voided that provision, which has enabled states to enact restrictive laws; for example, requiring individuals to present proof of citizenship and certain types of photo identification when voting and closing polling places in predominant black areas, causing citizens to wait in long lines for hours to cast their ballot.

At the same time, there are many current efforts to get people registered and to the polls. Both political parties expend great amounts of time, energy and money, identifying and motivating their potential supporters. This year many corporations are encouraging their employees to get involved in the political process. At least one company, the retailer Old Navy, has offered a full day’s pay for those who will volunteer to staff polling places. More than 700 companies have pledged to make Election Day a paid holiday or to give their employees time off to vote. Several national organizations are working together to get sports arenas and facilities around the country to open their venues for registering and voting. Some NBA teams, which own their own arenas, are cooperating with local officials to open them as convenient and accessible polling sites. For example, Madison Square Garden intends to serve over 60,000, making it the largest polling site in New York City. Making Election Day a national holiday, as it is in many countries, including France and Mexico, would surely increase voter turnout, especially among those now restricted by their work schedules. To answer those who oppose adding another holiday, some have suggested celebrating Veterans Day as Election Day, which would also be a way of honoring those who fought to preserve democratic freedoms. An alternate approach to a federal holiday is for more states to make Election Day a state holiday, as nine states have already done.

Some people may be inclined to play down the problem of low voter participation because they themselves vote regularly as do their family and friends. This, however, would be shortsighted since wide participation in the political process is essential to a healthy democracy and contributes to the well-being of the country. We could all engage this important issue more personally by thinking through how we could persuade reluctant citizens to vote. Studies indicate that some people cast their ballot because they believe their vote will affect the outcome of the election. However, political scientists point out that a voter is more likely to win the lottery than to cast the decisive vote in an election. Our arguments for voting should be realistic and honest and not contribute to what psychologists call “voter’s illusion” that prompts individuals to ignore the mathematical probabilities while presuming their vote does affect the outcome. Another reason citizens cast ballots is because voting is what is expected, what good people do, what citizenship requires and what common morality demands. This suggests it might be effective to remind a very responsible but reluctant individual that there is a moral responsibility to vote. Others are motivated by more altruistic concerns, as suggested by studies showing charitable persons are more likely to vote than self-centered individuals. With this in mind, it would make sense to encourage a generous but reluctant person to vote because it would be a great way to show love of country.

In her thoughtful book, *Law’s Virtues,* theologian and legal scholar, Cathleen Kaveny, suggests that voting not only selects our political leaders but also has an “expressive” purpose, a way of “sending a message” about our “general attitudes” toward the “course of the community” (p.198). Along this line, we could add that voting publicly expresses various positive inner sentiments: appreciation for living in a country with democratic traditions; gratitude for the many courageous persons who fought to achieve and extend the right to vote; a desire to participate in the political process; an aspiration to help our country live up to its highest ideals; and a commitment to preserve the electoral process.

Kaveny also indicates that voting has a “contributive” function through which we contribute to the welfare of the country as a whole. Voting is, as Kaveny puts it, “an act of political solidarity with one’s community.” It has intrinsic value, apart from consequences. A vote for a losing candidate is not really wasted but contributes to the health of the electoral process. It is the common good of the whole country that suffers when large numbers do not vote or when minority voting is suppressed. By voting, we may not be able to determine the outcome of an election, but we can express our inner sentiments and contribute to the common good.

In their book, *Fullness of Faith,* the brothers Michael and Kenneth Himes offer an account of the virtue of patriotism that can be used to ground the responsibility to vote. For them, patriotism is “a combination of affections for a nation-state.” It involves a “legitimate appreciation” of the goods enacted by the country and “seeks to protect, promote and preserve those goods.” Patriotism promotes the common good, not in abstract theory, but by engaging in the concrete practical politics of a country with its history and distinctive characteristics. Patriotism is a type of loyalty akin to loyalty to our family or our school, but with differences in tone and emphasis: for example, less intimate and more pragmatic. Loyalty to country must be clearly distinguished from a nationalism that makes an idol of the nation, turning a preliminary concern into an ultimate concern, a partial good into a total good. Authentic patriotism, which rejects idolatrous nationalism, recognizes the concrete reality of the political process, which is never perfect and seldom smooth but involves debate, compromise and tradeoffs. Patriotic citizens vote even if the candidates are flawed, the issues are not clear and the process is laborious.

In their document on political responsibility, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the American bishops insist that in the Catholic Tradition, “responsible citizenship is a virtue and participation in political life is a moral responsibility” (n13). This obligation “inherent in the dignity of the human person” is rooted in “our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear witness in all we do.” Recognizing that politics today are often sullied by “powerful interests, partisan attacks, sound bites and media hype,” the bishops call for a political engagement shaped by “moral convictions” and “focused on the dignity of every human being, the pursuit of the common good and the protection of the week and the vulnerable.” They quote Pope Francis: “Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, in as much as it seeks the common good.” They go on to insist that we are all called “to bring together our principles and our political choices, our values and our votes, to help build a civilization of truth and love” (n14). Even if we feel “politically disenfranchised” and not totally at home with either party or candidate, this is not a “time for retreat or discouragement; rather it is a time for renewed engagement” (n16).

Commentators representing both political parties claim the 2020 presidential election is the most consequential in recent history. This suggests that our moral responsibility to participate in the electoral process is more compelling than ever. For some this may mean voting for the first time or voting with greater attention to long-term consequences. For others it may mean getting more involved in the whole political process: for example, helping a home-bound neighbor vote by mail, contacting prospective voters, working at a polling site or driving people to a convenient place to vote. It may also mean trying to persuade a reluctant individual to vote this year. I hope some of the suggestions in this article will encourage and illumine those conversations.