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**Overcoming Voter Reluctance: Public and Personal Strategies**

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In the hotly contested 2020 presidential election approximately 77 million eligible voters did not cast a ballot. Although the percentage of Americans actually voting in 2020 was the highest in over a century and 8% higher than in 2016, the fact that about a third of the country did not go to the polls is indeed distressing as we work to save our fragile democracy.

After the 2016 election, the Knight Foundation sponsored an extensive study of non-voting Americans and in 2020 published a 68-page report “The Untold Story of American Non-Voting.” The survey of 12,000 chronic non-voters revealed that they are not a monolithic group, but are as diverse as American society itself. Nor is there a “single unifying explanation for their lack of participation.”

The study did, however, identify several common themes. Chronic non-voters are not confident that elections represent the will of the people. They tend to think that the electoral college system does not work well and that elections are rigged. Other top reasons for not voting are that they do not like the candidates and their vote does not matter.

Compared to active voters, reluctant voters spend less time following the news and are more likely to feel they do not have enough information about candidates and issues to vote. They tend to be less partisan and are evenly divided on major current issues. If they all voted in 2020, their votes would have been about evenly divided between Trump and Biden.

Chronic non-voters as a whole tend to be less educated and have lower incomes than those who vote regularly. The emerging electorate (citizens 18-24 years old) are even less informed and less interested in politics than current non-voters. This suggests that voter reluctance will continue to threaten American democracy into the foreseeable future. The study also found that restrictive voter laws did not play a significant role in citizens deciding not to register or vote.

In 2020, about 86% of the non-voting population was not registered to vote. Focus groups organized by the Knight Foundation indicated they did not register because they simply had no interest in the electoral process. Furthermore, a significant number said they could not imagine any changes in the system that would get them interested and involved. Remarkably, approximately 33% of non-voters say they do not even want a say in major governmental decisions that impact their lies, but are content to leave that to others.

The report identifies two major types of habitual non-voters. The “Plugged In” are generally more interested and informed about politics and are more engaged in their communities. They more closely resemble active voters in terms of attitude and behavior, some indicating they do trust the electoral system and do examine the issues. The other type, the “Disconnected,” are less interested in politics and less engaged in civic life. Many of them are not registered because they have no interest in the electoral process and some say nothing would motivate them to cast a ballot.

In its conclusion, “The Untold Story” summarizes some of its major findings. Chronic non-voters are more diverse than previously recognized. They come from all walks of life and every strata of society and are fairly divided in their party, policy and candidate preferences. Compared to active votes reluctant voters report lower belief in the efficacy of the election system, lower engagement with news and information about politics and somewhat lower civic engagement and life satisfaction.

A 2018 study by the Center for America Progress (CAP) identifies policies that have actually increased voter participation in some states. Increasing voter registration is a crucial first step in getting more citizens to the polls. For example, the state of Oregon has an Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) program that automatically puts people who apply for a driver’s license on the voter rolls. Due to AVR, almost 95% of eligible Oregon voters were registered to vote in the 2020 election and 77 % actually cast a ballot. At least 19 other states have some form of AVR.

Same-Day Voter Registration (SDR) is also effective, according to the CAP study. In Minnesota, for instance, voters can register on election day by presenting a valid driver’s license and proof of residence. Almost 80% of the state’s eligible voters cast ballots in the 2020 elections, the second time in a row that Minnesota led the nation in voter turnout for the presidential election. There are 18 other states that allow residents to register on election day, including Michigan and Wyoming. The CAP study suggests that states with SDR have a voter participation rate 5% higher than states without this policy. The report also claims that SDR raises the participation of minorities and young citizens.

In 2010, the state of North Carolina adopted a preregistration program that allowed 16- and 17-year-olds to register to vote in the 2012 election which added 60,000 young citizens to the voter rolls and significantly increased the percentage of youth actually casting ballots. There are 15 states that allow preregistration of 16-year-olds and four other states that move the age up to 17. One study of the 2020 election found that states with pre-registration programs had a much higher voter turnout rate than those without that option.

In 2002, Arizona was the first state to allow on-line voter registration and now 42 states provide that option. The CAP study suggests that this has increased voter turnout. In Georgia, for example, 70% of those who registered on-line cast a vote, compared to about 50% of those who registered by mail or through a state agency. On-line registration is especially important for getting young citizens involved in the political process.

In addition to promoting various voter registration programs, the CAP study advocates strengthening civics education in our schools. The study specifically recommends adopting “Kids Voting USA,” a non-partisan education program which has been successful in increasing voter turnout. In Kansas, for example, counties that incorporated the program into the school curriculum, voter participation was significantly higher for both 18-year-olds and their parents than in counties without the program. The course includes mock elections, classroom discussion of policy issues and homework assignments requiring conversation with parents on political matters.

As this brief survey indicates, there are practical ways of increasing voter turnout. Public opinion can influence politicians and community leaders to implement some of these effective strategies and programs. In voting for candidates at all levels, individual citizens can take into account their position on expanding or restricting voter participation. Parents can help persuade school boards to promote more effective civic education programs.

Furthermore, we could all try to encourage reluctant voters in our circle of influence to cast a ballot. Spouses could make a pact committing themselves to vote. Parents could remind their adult children to register so they are eligible to vote. Grandparents could talk to a grandchild about civic issues important to young citizens, stressing the importance of participating in the electoral process. Friends could both do some research and share ideas on the character, competence and policy positions of candidates for office. Families could make it easier for a neighbor to get to the polls by providing a ride or babysitting help. Catholics could offer a friendly reminder to a reluctant fellow parishioner that our faith teaches that we have a serious moral obligation to vote. An employee could invite a co-worker to go with her to vote after work. A grandfather could try to educate his grandchildren on a moral approach to political issues by giving each one on their 16th birthday access to the publications of NETWORK, the national Catholic social justice lobby established and run by Catholic nuns. A grandmother could gather her older grandchildren for a mock election party at her home, which would include a discussion of candidates and their policy positions.

These imagined examples are designed to encourage all of us to find specific creative ways to get individuals to cast a ballot. There are compelling reasons for doing our part to expand voter participation. Practically, getting just one reluctant person to the polls could have a ripple effect. The new voter could become a consistent voter and could encourage others to participate in the pollical process.

From a Christian perspective, voting is a moral imperative, a serious ethical obligation, an exercise of the virtue of justice. Every effort to get citizens to vote has an intrinsic value and contributes to the spread of God’s reign of peace and justice in the world. Christian patriotism inclines us to follow our better angels and empowers us to do our part to form a more perfect union where more citizens participate in the electoral process.