

Voting: the Democratic ideal?

Electing a president, mercifully, is a ritual we Americans practice only once every four years. Right now, this may seem hard to believe. Many of us cannot recall a time when we did not fantasize about putting Al Gore in an ironclad, sound-proof lockbox or wonder just what Texas governors do with their 20 months of legislative-free time every biennium. A modern George Orwell would make Room 101 the place where common citizens face the rat-free torture of watching a fourth presidential debate.

In the 1996 presidential election, only 66 percent of eligible American adults were registered to vote, and only 49 percent eventually did so. The current election campaign makes the 51 percent who did not vote seem astutely prescient. Large numbers of our fellow citizens are either apathetic about the political process or oblivious to it. Who can blame them?



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Community organizational strategist Ernesto Cortés Jr. used to say that the Republican Party represents those people who make more than \$350,000 a year, and the Democratic Party those who make more than \$150,000 a year. The rest of us folks have got to make do. The last time I heard him say this was two years ago in Abilene. Given current economic trends, we should ratchet up his cut-off numbers to a half-million and a quarter-million.

Even politically conscientious Americans in such rarified income brackets have surely concluded by now that one candidate is incomprehensible about the issues and the other uncertain what they are. How else do we explain their responses to questions during the debates? I teach mainly 18- to 24-year-olds at the University of Texas at Austin. None was inspired to go out and vote by hearing the vice president's live recorded message on

campaign-finance reform. Many were appalled that the governor could use fuzzy math while crowing about the use of the death penalty for what is still not considered a hate crime in our state. Here is how one student summed up the debaters: "They made me want to flip a coin."

It is easy then to explain current voter apathy. The candidates are uninspiring and are speaking unintelligibly or unintelligently. Should we be concerned that fewer and fewer of us are bothering to vote?

Think about it. When did we have high voter turnouts? The good old days when bosses like Mayor Richard Daley ran cities like Chicago. Then effective political machines counted on precinct, ward and neighborhood leaders, on union organizations and on church groups to guarantee that hard-working men and women voted early and often and occasionally even from the cemetery. For even higher turnouts, I recall eastern bloc countries under the former Soviet Union, Franco's Spain, the military junta in Greece and

Castro's Cuba. Amazing citizen enthusiasm for voting. Equally amazing unanimity of opinion among the voters.

Without political machines, strong unions, fascist or communist dictatorships, or proactive community organizations, turnout depends on the individual voters, the candidates and the issues. Under those conditions, 50 percent seems wildly, unimaginably high.

But then again, I take the long view. In ancient Athens, the birthplace of democracy, 30,000 adult male citizens had the right to vote. They did so in the Assembly on bills proposed by the legislature and on other important matters such as whether to go to war. The Assembly met in a place called the Pnyx. It held 6,000 people. These are not fuzzy numbers. The architects of Western democracy took voter apathy for granted.

Don't take my word for it. Aristophanes' play *The Acharnians* opens with citizens in the Athenian market place desperately trying to avoid the

official who is charged with whipping them into attending the assembly and voting.

The Athenians had a second approach to the voter-apathy problem. All 500 legislators and the main public magistrates, except for military officials, were chosen yearly by lottery. The Athenians wisely reasoned thus. Why go through the time and expense of electioneering when results of equal quality can be obtained by random luck of the draw? Instead then of worrying about the qualifications of political hucksters, citizens had to worry about whether they themselves knew enough to run the state if their names came up.

Give us a choice between the system we have now and an Athenian-style lottery, and I'll guarantee massive voter turnout. The pollsters, lobbyists, talking heads and spin-doctors will turn out in droves.

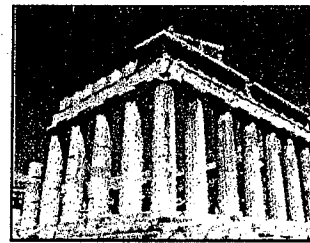
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INSIGHT

Good old apathy

Low voter turnout a symptom of modern malaise? Hardly, says Thomas G. Palaima — just look at ancient Athens.

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