Case 15: Voters: Pay or Penalize

In the 2016 US Presidential election, 55.7 percent of Americans eighteen years or older exercised their civic duty by voting. That percentage puts the United States in the bottom third of the world’s developed countries in terms of participation by eligible voters.

In off-year or mid-term elections, the turnout is even lower. In primary races, the turnout rates drop into single digits, accounting perhaps for the shift to more polarized and polarizing candidates.

Opinion pieces in many newspaper editorial pages have lamented the lack of voter participation and offered suggestions of what to do about it. Eight states currently register citizens on their 18th birthday unless they decline. Other states are considering ways to make registering easier. Some even allow voters to register when they go to vote. Some allow voters to go to any polling place in their jurisdiction on election day not just to the ones where they are registered.

No state has yet made voting mandatory. For that matter, neither has the US government. However, Australia and Belgium, two nations that lead the world in voter participation, require voters to exercise their civic duty at the polls. Australia even goes so far as to collect a $20 penalty from those who don’t.

Yale Law professor Stephen J. Carter has made a contrasting proposal: Pay citizens to vote. Perhaps that would help encourage more young people, minorities, and lower income voters to go to the polls.

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